

One

Newark was left behind and the post-chaise-and-four entered on a stretch of flat country which offered little to attract the eye, or occasion remark. Miss Taverner withdrew her gaze from the landscape and addressed her companion, a fair youth who was lounging in his corner of the chaise somewhat sleepily surveying the back of the nearest post-boy. 'How tedious it is to be sitting still for so many hours at a stretch!' she remarked. 'When do we reach Grantham, Perry?'

Her brother yawned. 'Lord, I don't know! It was you who would go to London.'

Miss Taverner made no reply to this, but picked up a *Traveller's Guide* from the seat beside her, and began to flutter the leaves over. Young Sir Peregrine yawned again, and observed that the new pair of wheelers, put in at Newark, were good-sized strengthly beasts, very different from the last pair, which had both of them been touched in the wind.

Miss Taverner was deep in the *Traveller's Guide*, and agreed to this without raising her eyes from the closely printed page.

She was a fine young woman, rather above the average height, and had been used for the past four years to hearing herself proclaimed a remarkably handsome girl. She could not, however, admire her own beauty, which was of a type she was inclined to despise. She had rather have had black hair; she thought the fairness of her gold curls insipid. Happily, her brows and lashes were dark, and her eyes which were startlingly blue (in

the manner of a wax doll, she once scornfully told her brother) had a directness and a fire which gave a great deal of character to her face. At first glance one might write her down a mere Dresden china miss, but a second glance would inevitably discover the intelligence in her eyes, and the decided air of resolution in the curve of her mouth.

She was dressed neatly, but not in the first style of fashion, in a plain round gown of French cambric, frilled round the neck with scalloped lace; and a close mantle of twilled sarcenet. A poke-bonnet of basket-willow with a striped velvet ribbon rather charmingly framed her face, and a pair of York tan gloves were drawn over her hands, and buttoned tightly round her wrists.

Her brother, who had resumed his slumbrous scrutiny of the post-boy's back, resembled her closely. His hair was more inclined to brown, and his eyes less deep in colour than hers, but he must always be known for her brother. He was a year younger than Miss Taverner, and, either from habit or carelessness, was very much in the habit of permitting her to order things as she chose.

'It is fourteen miles from Newark to Grantham,' announced Miss Taverner, raising her eyes from the *Traveller's Guide*. 'I had not thought it had been so far.' She bent over the book again. 'It says here – it is Kearsley's *Entertaining Guide*, you know, which you procured for me in Scarborough – that it is *a neat and populous town on the River Witham. It is supposed to have been a Roman station, by the remains of a castle which have been dug up.* I must say, I should like to explore there if we have the time, Perry.'

'Oh, lord, you know ruins always look the same!' objected Sir Peregrine, digging his hands into the pockets of his buckskin breeches. 'I tell you what it is, Judith: if you're set on poking about all the castles on the way we shall be a full week on the road. I'm all for pushing forward to London.'

'Very well,' submitted Miss Taverner, closing the *Traveller's Guide*, and laying it on the seat. 'We will bespeak an early breakfast at the George, then, and you must tell them at what hour you will have the horses put-to.'

‘I thought we were to lie at the Angel,’ remarked Sir Peregrine.

‘No,’ replied his sister decidedly. ‘You have forgot the wretched account the Mincemans gave us of the comfort to be had there. It is the George and I wrote to engage our rooms, on account of Mrs Minceman warning me of the fuss and to-do she had once when they would have had her go up two pair of stairs to a miserable apartment at the back of the house.’

Sir Peregrine turned his head to grin amicably at her. ‘Well, I don’t fancy they’ll succeed in fobbing you off with a back room, Ju.’

‘Certainly not,’ replied Miss Taverner, with a severity somewhat belied by the twinkle in her eye.

‘No, that’s certain,’ pursued Peregrine. ‘But what I’m waiting to see, my love, is the way you’ll handle the old man.’

Miss Taverner looked a little anxious. ‘I could handle Papa, Perry, couldn’t I? If only Lord Worth is not a subject to gout! I think that was the only time when Papa became quite unmanageable.’

‘All old men have gout,’ said Peregrine.

Miss Taverner sighed, acknowledging the truth of this pronouncement.

‘It’s my belief,’ added Peregrine, ‘that he don’t want us to come to town. Come to think of it, didn’t he say so?’

Miss Taverner loosened the strings of her reticule, and groped in it for a slender packet of letters. She spread one of these open. ‘“Lord Worth presents his compliments to Sir Peregrine and Miss Taverner and thinks it inadvisable for them to attempt the fatigues of a journey to London at this season. His lordship will do himself the honour of calling upon them in Yorkshire when next he is in the North.” And that,’ concluded Miss Taverner, ‘was written three months ago – you may see the date for yourself, Perry: 29th June, 1811 – and not even in his own hand. I am sure it is a secretary wrote it, or those horrid lawyers. Depend upon it, Lord Worth has forgotten our very existence, because you know all the arrangements about the money we

should have were made by the lawyers, and whenever there is any question to be settled it is they who write about it. So if he does not like us to come to London it is quite his fault for not having made the least attempt to come to us, or to tell us what we must do. I think him a very poor guardian. I wish my father had named one of our friends in Yorkshire, someone we are acquainted with. It is very disagreeable to be under the governance of a stranger.'

'Well, if Lord Worth don't want to be at the trouble of ordering our lives, so much the better,' said Peregrine. 'You want to cut a dash in town, and I daresay I can find plenty of amusement if we haven't a crusty old guardian to spoil the fun.'

'Yes,' agreed Miss Taverner, a trifle doubtfully. 'But in common civility we must ask his permission to set up house in London. I do hope we shall not find him set against us, regarding it as an imposition, I mean; perhaps thinking that my uncle might rather have been appointed than himself. It must appear very singular to him. It is an awkward business, Perry.'

A grunt being the only response to this, she said no more, but leaned back in her corner and perused the unsatisfactory communications she had received from Lord Worth.

It was an awkward business. His lordship, who must, she reflected, be going on for fifty-five or fifty-six years of age, showed a marked disinclination to trouble himself with the affairs of his wards, and although this might in some circumstances be reckoned a good, in others it must be found to be a pronounced evil. Neither she nor Peregrine had ever been farther from home than to Scarborough. They knew nothing of London, and had no acquaintance there to guide them. The only persons known to them in the whole town were their uncle, and a female cousin living respectably, but in a small way, in Kensington. This lady Miss Taverner must rely upon to present her into society, for her uncle, a retired Admiral of the Blue, had lived upon terms of such mutual dislike and mistrust with her father as must preclude her from seeking either his support or his acquaintance.

Sir John Taverner had never been heard to speak with the smallest degree of kindness of his brother, and when his gout was at its worst, he had been used to refer to him as a damned scoundrelly fellow whom he would not trust the length of his own yard-arm. There were very few people whom Sir John had ever spoken of with much complaisance, but he had from time to time given his children such instances of their uncle's conduct as convinced them that he must indeed be a shabby creature, and no mere victim of Sir John's prejudice.

Lord Worth might think it singular that he who had not set eyes on his old friend once in the last ten years should have been appointed guardian to his children, but they, knowing Sir John, found it easily understandable. Sir John, always irascible, could never be brought during the last years of his life to live on terms of cordiality with his neighbours. There must always be quarrels. But from having lived secluded on his estates ever since the death of his wife and not having met Lord Worth above three times in a dozen years, he had had no quarrel with him, and had come by insensible degrees to consider him the very person to have the care of his children in the event of his own decease. Worth was a capital fellow; Sir John could trust him to administer the very considerable fortune he would leave his children; there was no fear of Worth warming his own pockets. The thing was done, the Will drawn up without the smallest reference to it being made either to Worth or to the children themselves – a circumstance, Miss Taverner could not but reflect, entirely in keeping with all Sir John's high-handed dealings.

She was aroused from these musings by the rattle and bump of the chaise-wheels striking cobblestones, and looked up to find that they had reached Grantham.

As they drew into the town the post-boys were obliged to slacken the pace considerably, so much traffic was there in the streets, and such a press of people thronging the pathways, and even the road itself.

All was bustle and animation, and when the chaise came at last within sight of the George, a huge red-brick structure on the

main street, Miss Taverner was surprised to see any number of coaches, curricles, gigs, and phaetons drawn up before it.

‘Well,’ she said, ‘I am glad I followed Mrs Minceman’s advice and wrote to bespeak our rooms. I had no notion we should find Grantham so crowded.’

Sir Peregrine had roused himself, and was leaning forward to look out of the window. ‘The place seems to be in the devil of a pucker,’ he remarked. ‘There must be something out of the way going forward.’

In another moment the chaise had turned in under the archway to the courtyard, and come to a standstill. There an even greater bustle reigned, every ostler being so fully occupied that for some minutes no one approached the chaise or gave the least sign of having observed its arrival. A post-boy already booted and spurred, with a white smock over his uniform, who was leaning against the wall with a straw between his teeth, did indeed survey the chaise in a disinterested manner, but since it was no part of his business to change the horses, or inquire after the travellers’ wants, he made no movement to come forward.

With an exclamation of impatience Sir Peregrine thrust open the door in the front of the chaise, and sprang down, briefly admonishing his sister to sit still and wait. He strode off towards the lounging post-boy, who straightened himself respectfully at his approach, and removed the straw from his mouth. After a short colloquy with the boy, Sir Peregrine came hurrying back to the chaise, his boredom quite vanished, and his eyes fairly sparkling with anticipation.

‘Judith! The best of good fortune! A mill! Only think of it! Out of all the days in the year to have come to Grantham, and by the veriest chance!’

‘A mill?’ echoed Miss Taverner, drawing her brows together.

‘Yes, am I not telling you? The Champion – Tom Cribb, you know – is to fight Molyneux to-morrow at some place or another – I did not perfectly catch the name – close by here. Thank God for it you had the good sense to bespeak our rooms, for they say

there is not a bed to be had for twenty miles round! Come, don't be dawdling any longer, Ju!

The intelligence that she had come to Grantham on the eve of a prize-fight could scarcely afford Miss Taverner gratification, but from having spent the greater part of her life in the company of her father and brother, and from having been used to hear a great deal of talk about manly sports and to think them perfectly proper for gentlemen to take part in, she readily acquiesced in Peregrine's desire to be present at this fight. For herself she had rather have been elsewhere. Prize-fighting could only disgust her, and although there would naturally be no question of her being a witness of the spectacle, she must expect to hear of it all at second-hand, and to find herself, in all probability, the only female in an inn full to overflowing with sporting gentlemen. She did attempt a slight remonstrance, without, however, much hope of being attended to. 'But, Perry, consider! If the fight is for to-morrow, that is Saturday, and we must stay here until Monday, for you would not care to travel on Sunday. You know we were counting on being in London to-morrow.'

'Oh, pooh, what in the world does that signify?' he replied. 'I would not miss this mill for a hundred pounds! I tell you what: you may explore your Roman ruins as much as you choose. You know that is what you wanted. And only to think of it! Cribb and Molyneux! You must have heard me speak of the fight last year, and wish I might have been there. Thirty-three rounds, and the Black resigned! But they say he is in better figure to-day. It will be a great mill: you would not wish me to miss it! Why, when they met before it lasted fifty-five minutes! They must be devilish even-matched. Do come down, Ju!'

No, Miss Taverner would not wish Peregrine to miss anything that could give him pleasure. She picked up the *Traveller's Guide*, and her reticule, and taking his hand stepped down from the chaise into the courtyard.

The landlord met them upon their entrance into the inn but seemed to have very little time to bestow on them. The coffee-room was already crowded and there were a dozen gentlemen of

consequence demanding his attention. Rooms? There was not a corner of his house unbespoken. He would advise them to have a fresh team put to and drive on to Greetham, or Stamford. He did not know – he believed there was not an inn with accommodation to offer this side of Norman’s Cross. He was sorry, but they would understand that the occasion was extraordinary, and all his bedchambers had been engaged for days back.

This, however, would not do for Judith Taverner, accustomed her whole life to command. ‘There is some mistake,’ she said, in her cool decided voice. ‘I am Miss Taverner. You will have had my letter a full week ago. I require two bedchambers, accommodation for my maid, and for my brother’s valet, who will be here presently, and a private parlour.’

The landlord threw up his hands in a gesture of despair, but he was impressed a little by her air of authority. He had been at first inclined to underrate a couple so modestly dressed, but the mention of a maid and a valet convinced him that he had to do with persons of quality, whom he would not wish to offend. He embarked on a flood of explanation and apology. He was sure Miss Taverner would not care to stay under the circumstances.

Judith raised her brows. ‘Indeed! I fancy I am the best judge of that. I will forgo the private parlour, but be good enough to make some arrangement for our bedchambers at once.’

‘It is impossible, ma’am!’ declared the landlord. ‘The house is as full as it can hold. Every room is engaged! I should have to turn some gentleman out to oblige you.’

‘Then do so,’ said Judith.

The landlord looked imploringly towards Peregrine. ‘You must see, sir, I can’t help myself. I’m very sorry for the fault, but there’s no help for it, and indeed the company is not what the lady would like.’

‘Judith, it does seem that we shall have to go elsewhere,’ said Peregrine reasonably. ‘Perhaps Stamford – I could see the fight from there, or even farther.’

‘Certainly not,’ said Judith. ‘You heard what this man said, that he believed there is not a room to be had this side of

Norman's Cross. I do not mean to go on such a wild-goose chase. Our rooms were bespoken here, and if a mistake has been made it must be set right.'

Her voice, which was very clear, seemed to have reached the ears of a group of persons standing over against the window. One or two curious glances were directed towards her, and after a moment's hesitation a man who had been watching Miss Taverner from the start came across the room, and made her a bow.

'I beg pardon – I do not wish to intrude, but there seems to be some muddle. I should be glad to place my rooms at your disposal, ma'am, if you would do me the honour of accepting them.'

The man at her elbow looked to be between twenty-seven and thirty years of age. His manner proclaimed the gentleman; he had a decided air of fashion; and his countenance, without being handsome, was sufficiently pleasing. Judith sketched a curtsy. 'You are very good, sir, but you are not to be giving up your rooms to two strangers.'

He smiled. 'No such thing, ma'am. We cannot tell but what my rooms should properly be yours. My friend and I –' he made a slight gesture as though to indicate someone in the group behind him – 'have acquaintances in the neighbourhood, and may readily command a lodging at Hungerton Lodge. I – rather I should say *we* – are happy to be of service.'

There was nothing to do but thank him, and accept his offer. He bowed again, and withdrew to rejoin his friends. The landlord, relieved to be extricated from a difficult situation, led the way out of the coffee-room, and delivered his new guests into the care of a chamber-maid. In a very little time they found themselves in possession of two respectable apartments on the first floor, and had nothing further to do than to await the arrival of their trunks.

It was one of Miss Taverner's first concerns to discover the name of her unknown benefactor, but by the time she had seen her baggage bestowed, and arranged for a truckle-bed to be set

up in the room for her maid, he had left the inn. The landlord did not know him; he had arrived only a few minutes before themselves; he was not an habitual traveller upon that road.

Judith was disappointed, but had to be satisfied. There was no finding out in the crowd flocking to Grantham who one individual might be. She owned herself pleased with him. He had a well-bred air; the delicacy with which he had managed the whole business; his withdrawing just when he ought, all impressed her in his favour. She would not be sorry to make his better acquaintance.

Peregrine agreed to his being a civil fellow, owned himself much beholden to him, would be glad to meet him again, thought it odds they must run across each other in the town, but was more immediately concerned with the means of getting to the scene of the fight next day. It was to be at Thistleton Gap, some eight or more miles to the south-west of Grantham. A conveyance must be found; he would not go in his chaise: that was unthinkable. A curricule must be hired, or a gig, and before he could sit down to his dinner he must be off to see whether he could come by one.

It was four o'clock, and Miss Taverner had not been used to fashionable hours. She would dine at once, and in her room. Sir Peregrine patted her shoulder, and said she would be more comfortable in her own room.

Judith curled her lip at him. 'Well, you like to think so, my dear.'

'You couldn't dine in the coffee-room,' he assured her. 'It may do very well for me, but for you it won't answer.'

'Go and find your curricule,' said Judith, between amusement and exasperation.

He needed no further encouragement; he was gone in a trice, nor did he return until after five o'clock. He came in then, highly elated, full of his good fortune. There was no coming by a curricule – no gentleman's carriage to be had at all, but he had heard of a gig owned by some farmer, a shabby affair, scarce an inch of paint on it, but it would serve – and been off immediately

to drive the bargain. The long and short of it was he had driven the gig back, and was ready now to do all that a brother should for his sister's entertainment in taking her out to see ruins, or whatever else she chose. Dinner? Oh, he had eaten a tight little beefsteak in the coffee-room, and was entirely at her disposal.

Miss Taverner could not but feel that with the town seething with sporting company, it was hardly the moment for an expedition, but she was heartily sick of her own room, and agreed to the scheme.

The gig was found upon inspection to be not quite so bad as Peregrine described, but still, a shabby affair. Miss Taverner grimaced at it. 'My dear Perry, I had rather walk!'

'Walk? Oh, lord, I have had enough of that, I can tell you! I must have tramped a good mile already. Don't be so nice, Ju! It ain't what I'd choose, but no one knows us here.'

'You had better let me drive,' she remarked.

But that, of course, would not do. If she thought she could drive better than he, she much mistook the matter. The brute was hard-mouthed, not a sweet-goer by any means, no case for a lady.

They went down the main street at a sober pace, but once clear of the town Sir Peregrine let his hands drop, and they jolted away at a great rate, if not in the best style, bumping over every inequality in the road, and lurching round the corners.

'Perry, this is insupportable,' Judith said at last. 'Every tooth rattles in my head! You will run into something. Do, I beg of you, remember that you are to take me to see the Roman castle! I am persuaded you are on the wrong road.'

'Oh, I had forgot that curst castle!' he said ruefully. 'I was meaning to see which road I must take to-morrow – to Thistleton Gap, you know. Very well, very well, I'll turn, and go back!' He reined in the horse as he spoke, and began at once to turn, quite heedless of the narrowness of the road at this point, and the close proximity of a particularly sharp bend in it.

'Good God, what will you do next?' exclaimed Judith. 'If anything were to come round the corner! I wish you would give me the reins!'

She spoke too late. He had the gig all across the road, and seemed in danger of running into the ditch if his attention were distracted. She heard the sound of horses travelling fast and made a snatch at the reins.

Round the corner swept a curricle-and-four at breakneck speed. It was upon them; it must crash into them; there could be no stopping it. Peregrine tried to wrench the horse round, cursing under his breath; Judith felt herself powerless to move. She had a nightmarish vision of four magnificent chestnuts thundering down on her, and of a straight figure in a caped overcoat driving them. It was over in a flash. The chestnuts were swung miraculously to the off; the curricle's mudguard caught only the wheels of the gig, and the chestnuts came to a plunging standstill.

The shock of the impact, though it was hardly more than a glancing scrape, startled the farmer's horse into an attempt to bolt, and in another moment one wheel of the gig was in the shallow ditch, and Miss Taverner was nearly thrown from her seat.

She righted herself, aware that her bonnet was crooked, and her temper in shreds, and found that the gentleman in the curricle was sitting perfectly unmoved, easily holding his horses. As she turned to look at him he spoke, not to her, but over his shoulder to a diminutive tiger perched behind him. 'Take it away, Henry, take it away,' he said.

Wrath, reproach, even oaths Miss Taverner could have pardoned. The provocation was great; she herself longed to box Peregrine's ears. But this calm indifference was beyond everything. Her anger veered irrationally towards the stranger. His manner, his whole bearing, filled her with repugnance. From the first moment of setting eyes on him she knew that she disliked him. Now she had leisure to observe him more closely, and found that she disliked him no less.

He was the epitome of a man of fashion. His beaver hat was set over black locks carefully brushed into a semblance of disorder; his cravat of starched muslin supported his chin in a

series of beautiful folds; his driving-coat of drab cloth bore no less than fifteen capes, and a double row of silver buttons. Miss Taverner had to own him a very handsome creature, but found no difficulty in detesting the whole cast of his countenance. He had a look of self-consequence; his eyes, ironically surveying her from under weary lids, were the hardest she had ever seen, and betrayed no emotion but boredom. His nose was too straight for her taste. His mouth was very well-formed, firm but thin-lipped. She thought it sneered.

Worse than all was his languor. He was uninterested, both in having dexterously averted an accident, and in the gig's plight. His driving had been magnificent; there must be unsuspected strength in those elegantly gloved hands holding the reins in such seeming carelessness, but in the name of God why must he put on an air of dandified affectation?

As the tiger jumped nimbly down on to the road Miss Taverner's annoyance found expression in abrupt speech: 'We don't need your assistance! Be pleased to drive on, sir!'

The cold eyes swept over her. Their expression made her aware of the shabbiness of the gig, of her own country-made dress, of the appearance she and Peregrine must present. 'I should be very pleased to drive on, my good girl,' said the gentleman in the curricule, 'but that apparently unmanageable steed of yours is – you may have noticed – making my progress impossible.'

Miss Taverner was not used to such a form of address, and it did not improve her temper. The farmer's horse, in its frightened attempts to drag the gig out of the ditch, was certainly plunging rather wildly across the narrow road, but if only Peregrine would go to its head instead of jobbing at it, all would be well. The tiger, a sharp-faced scrap of uncertain age, dressed in a smart blue and yellow livery, was preparing to take the guidance of matters into his own hands. Miss Taverner, unable to bear the indignity of it, said fiercely: 'Sir, I have already informed you that we don't need your help! Get down, Perry! Give the reins to me!'

'I have not the slightest intention of offering you my help,' said

the exquisite gentleman, rather haughtily raising his brows. 'You will find that Henry is quite able to clear the road for me.'

And, indeed, by this time the tiger had grasped the horse's rein above the bit, and was engaged in soothing the poor creature. This was very soon done, and in another minute the gig was clear of the ditch, and drawn up at the very edge of the road.

'You see, it was quite easy,' said that maddening voice.

Peregrine, who had till now been too much occupied in trying to control his horse to take part in the discussion, said angrily: 'I'm aware the fault was mine, sir! Well aware of it!'

'We are all well aware of it,' replied the stranger amicably. 'Only a fool would have attempted to turn his carriage at this precise point. Do you mean to keep me waiting very much longer, Henry?'

'I've said I admit the fault,' said Peregrine, colouring hotly, 'and I'm sorry for it! But I shall take leave to tell you, sir, that you were driving at a shocking pace!'

He was interrupted somewhat unexpectedly by the tiger, who lifted a face grown suddenly fierce, and said in shrill Cockney accents: 'You shut your bone-box, impudence! He's the very best whip in the country, ah, and I ain't forgetting Sir John Lade neither! There ain't none to beat him, and them's blood-chestnuts we've got in hand, and if them wheelers ain't sprained a tendon apiece it ain't nowise your fault!'

The gentleman in the curricule laughed. 'Very true, Henry, but you will have observed that I am still waiting.'

'Well, lord love yer, gov'nor, ain't I coming?' protested the tiger, scrambling back on to his perch.

Peregrine, recovering from his astonishment at the tiger's outburst, said through his teeth: 'We shall meet again, sir, I promise you!'

'Do you think so?' said the gentleman in the curricule. 'I hope you may be found to be wrong.'

The team seemed to leap forward; in another minute the curricule was gone.

'Insufferable!' Judith said passionately. '*Insufferable!*'

Two

To one used to the silence of a country night sleep at the George Inn, Grantham, on the eve of a great fight was almost an impossibility. Sounds of loud revelry floated up from the coffee-room to Miss Taverner's bedchamber until an early hour of the morning; she dozed fitfully, time and again awakened by a burst of laughter below-stairs, voices in the street below her window, or a hurrying footstep outside her door. After two o'clock the noise abated gradually, and she was able at last to fall into a sleep which lasted until three long blasts on a horn rudely interrupted it at twenty-three minutes past seven.

She started up in bed. 'Good God, what now?'

Her maid, who had also been awakened by the sudden commotion, slipped out of the truckle-bed, and ran to peep between the blinds of the window. She was able to report that it was only the Edinburgh mail, and stayed to giggle over the appearance presented by the night-capped passengers descending from it to partake of breakfast in the inn. Miss Taverner, quite uninterested, sank back upon her pillows, but soon found that peace was at an end. The house was awake, and beginning to be in a bustle. In a very short time she was glad to give up all attempt to go to sleep again, and get up.

Peregrine was knocking on her door before nine o'clock. She must come down to breakfast; he was advised to start in good time for Thistleton Gap if he wanted to procure a good place, and could not be dawdling.

She went down with him to the coffee-room. There were only

a few persons there, the passengers on the Edinburgh mail having been whisked off again on their journey south, and the sporting gentlemen who had made so much uproar the evening before apparently preferring to breakfast in the privacy of their own apartments.

As she had guessed, Peregrine had been of the company overnight. He had made the acquaintance of a set of very good fellows, though he could not recall their names at the moment, and had cracked a bottle with them. The talk had been all of the fight; his talk was still of it. He would back the Champion: Judith must know he had been trained by Captain Barclay of – of – he thought it was Ury, or some such queer name, but he could not be sure. At all events, he was the man who went on walking matches – she might have heard of him. It was said he had reduced Cribb to thirteen stone six pounds. Cribb was in fine fettle; he did not know about the Black, though there was no denying he could give Cribb four years. Cribb must be going on for thirty now. So it went on, while Judith ate her breakfast, and interpolated a yes or a no where it was required.

Peregrine had no qualms about leaving her to her own devices for the morning: the town would be empty, and she might walk abroad with perfect propriety; need not even take her maid.

Soon after he had finished his breakfast he was off, with a packet of sandwiches in one pocket and a bottle in the other. He had no difficulty in finding out the way: he had only to follow the stream of traffic a distance of eight miles. Everyone was bound for Thistleton Gap, in every conceivable kind of conveyance, from unwieldy coaches to farm-carts, and a great number, those who could not beg or buy a place in a wagon, afoot.

Progress was necessarily slow, but at last the scene of the fight was reached, a stubble-field, not far from Crown Point. It seemed already thick with people. In the middle men were busily engaged in erecting a twenty-five-foot stage.

Peregrine was directed to a quarter of the ground where the carriages of the gentry were to be ranged, and took up a position there, as close to the ring as he might. He had some time to wait

before the fight was due to begin, but he was in a mood to be pleased, and found plenty to interest him in watching the gradually thickening crowd. The company was for the most part a rough one, but as midday approached the carriages began to outnumber the wagons. The only circumstances to mar Peregrine's enjoyment were the facts of his having not one acquaintance amongst the Corinthians surrounding him, of his gig being out of the common shabby, and of his coat boasting no more than three modest capes. These were evils, but he forgot them when someone close to him said: 'Here's Jackson arrived!'

Loneliness, coat and gig were at once nothing: here was Gentleman Jackson, one-time champion, now the most famous teacher of boxing in England.

He was walking towards the ring with another man. As soon as he jumped up on to the stage the crowd set up a cheer for him, which he acknowledged with a smile and a good-humoured wave of his hand.

His countenance was by no means prepossessing, his brow being too low, his nose and mouth rather coarse, and his ears projecting from his head; but he had a fine pair of eyes, full and piercing, and his figure, though he was over forty years of age, was still remarkable for its grace and perfect proportions. He had very small hands, and models had been made of his ankles, which were said to be most beautifully turned. He was dressed in good style, but without display, and he had a quiet, unassuming manner.

He left the ring presently, and came over to speak with a red-headed man in a tilbury near to Peregrine's gig. A couple of young Corinthians hailed him, and there was a great deal of joking and laughter, in which Peregrine very much wished that he could have joined. However, it would not be very long now, he hoped, before he, too, would be offering odds that he would pop in a hit over Jackson's guard at their next sparring. And no doubt John Jackson would refuse to bet, just as he was refusing now, with that humorous smile and pleasant jest, that it would be no better than robbery, because everyone, even Sir

Peregrine Taverner, who had never been nearer to London than this in his life, knew that none of his pupils had ever managed to put in a hit on Jackson when he chose to deny them that privilege.

Jackson went back to join a group of gentlemen beside the ring in a few minutes, for he was to act as referee presently, and as usual had been put in charge of most of the arrangements. Peregrine was so busy watching him, and thinking about his famous sparring school at No. 13, Old Bond Street, and how he himself would be taking lessons there in a very short while, that he failed to notice the approach of a curricule-and-four, which edged its way in neatly to a place immediately alongside his own gig and there drew up.

A voice said: 'Starch is an excellent thing, but in moderation, Worcester, for heaven's sake in moderation! I thought George had dropped a hint in your ear?'

The voice was a perfectly soft one, but it brought Peregrine's head round with a jerk, and made him jump. It belonged to a gentleman who drove a team of blood-chestnuts, and wore a greatcoat with fifteen capes. He was addressing an exquisite in an enormously high collar and neck-cloth, who coloured and said: 'Oh, be damned to you, Julian!'

As ill-luck would have it, Peregrine's start had made him tighten the reins involuntarily, and the farmer's horse began to back. Peregrine stopped him in a moment, but not in time to prevent his right mudguard just grazing the curricule's left one. He could have sworn aloud from annoyance.

The gentleman in the curricule turned, brows lifted in pained astonishment. 'My very good sir,' he began, and then stopped. The astonishment gave place to an expression of resignation. 'I might have known,' he said. 'After all, you did promise yourself this meeting, did you not?'

It was said quite quietly, but Peregrine, hot with chagrin, felt that it must have drawn all eyes upon himself. Certainly the gentleman in the high collar was leaning forward to look at him across the intervening curricule. He blurted out: 'I hardly touched your carriage! I could not help it if I did!'

‘No, that is what I complain of,’ sighed his tormentor. ‘I’m sure you could not.’

Very red in the face, Peregrine said: ‘You needn’t be afraid, sir! This place will no longer do for me, I assure you!’

‘But what is the matter? What are you saying, Julian?’ demanded Lord Worcester curiously. ‘Who is it?’

‘An acquaintance of mine,’ replied the gentleman in the curricle. ‘Unsought, but damnably recurrent.’

Peregrine gathered up his reins in hands that were by no means steady; he might not find another place, but stay where he was he would not. He said: ‘I shall relieve you of my presence, sir!’

‘Thank you,’ murmured the other, faintly smiling.

The gig drew out of the line without mishap and was driven off with unusual care through the press of people. There was by this time no gap in the first row of carriages into which a gig might squeeze its way, and after driving down the length of the long line Peregrine began to regret his hastiness. But just as he was about to turn up an avenue left in the ranks to get to the rear a young gentleman in a smart-looking whisky hailed him good-naturedly, and offered to pull in a little closer to the coach on his right, and so contrive a space for the gig.

Peregrine accepted this offer thankfully, and after a little manœuvring and some protests from a party of men seated on the roof of the coach, room was made, and Peregrine could be comfortable again.

The owner of the whisky seemed to be a friendly young man. He had a chubby, smiling countenance, with a somewhat roguish pair of eyes. He was dressed in a blue single-breasted coat with a long waist, a blue waistcoat with inch-wide yellow stripes, plush breeches, tied at the knee with strings and rosettes, short boots with very long tops, and an amazing cravat of white muslin spotted with black. Over all this he wore a driving-coat of white drab, hanging negligently open, with two tiers of pockets, a Belcher handkerchief, innumerable capes, and a large nose-gay.

Having satisfied himself that Peregrine, in spite of his gig and

his old-fashioned dress, was not a mere Johnny Raw, he soon plunged into conversation; and in a very little while Peregrine learned that his name was Henry Fitzjohn, that he lived in Cork Street, was not long down from Oxford, and had come to Thistleton Gap in the expectation of joining a party of friends there. However, either because they had not yet arrived, or because the crowd was too dense to allow him to discover their position, he had missed them, and been forced to take up a place without them or lose his chance of seeing the fight. His dress was the insignia of the Four Horse Club, to which, as he naïvely informed Peregrine, he had been elected a member that very year.

He had backed the Champion to win the day's fight, and as soon as he discovered that Peregrine had never laid eyes on him – or, indeed, on any other of the notables present – he took it upon himself to point out every one of interest. That was Berkeley Craven, one of the stake-holders, standing by the ring now with Colonel Hervey Aston. Aston was one of the Duke of York's closest friends, and a great patron of the ring. Did Peregrine see that stoutish man with the crooked shoulder approaching Jackson? That was Lord Sefton, a capital fellow! And there, over to the right, was Captain Barclay, talking to Sir Watkin Williams Wynne, who was always to be seen at every fight. Mr Fitzjohn fancied that none of the Royal Dukes was present; he could not see them, though he had heard that Old Tarry Breeks – Clarence, of course – was expected to be there.

Peregrine drank it all in, feeling very humble and ignorant. In Yorkshire he had been used to know everyone and be known everywhere, but it was evident that in London circles it was different. Beverley Hall and the Taverner fortune counted for nothing; he was only an unknown provincial here.

Mr Fitzjohn produced an enormous turnip watch from his pocket and consulted it. 'It's after twelve,' he announced. 'If the magistrates have got wind of this and mean to stop it it will be a damned hum!'

But just at that moment some cheering, not unmixed with cat-

calls and a few derisive shouts, was set up, and Tom Molyneux, accompanied by his seconds, Bill Richmond, the Black, and Bill Gibbons, arbiter of sport, came up to the ring.

‘He looks a strong fellow,’ said Peregrine, anxiously scrutinising as much as he could see of the negro for the enveloping folds of his greatcoat.

‘Weighs something between thirteen and fourteen stone,’ said Mr Fitzjohn knowledgeably. ‘They say he loses his temper. You weren’t at the fight last year? No, of course you weren’t: I was forgetting. Well, y’know it was bad, very bad. The crowd booed him. Don’t know why, for they don’t boo at Richmond and he’s a Black, too. I daresay it was just from everyone’s wanting Cribb to win. But it was not at all the thing, and made the Black think he had not been fairly treated, though that was all my eye and Betty Martin, of course. Cribb is the better man, best fighter I ever saw in my life.’

‘Did you ever see Belcher?’ asked Peregrine.

‘Well, no,’ admitted Mr Fitzjohn regretfully. ‘Before my time, you know, though I did have the chance of being at his last fight, a couple of years ago, when he was beaten by Cribb. But I don’t know that I’m sorry I missed it. They say he was past it and then, of course, there was his eye – he only had one then, you know. My father said there was never a boxer to come near him in his day. Always remember my father telling me how he was at Wimbledon when Belcher knocked Gamble out in five rounds. Fight only lasted seven minutes. There were twenty thousand people there to see it. My father told me how the ring was within sight of the gibbet, and all the while they could hear Jerry Abershaw, who was hanging there in chains, creaking every time the wind caught him. Holla, this looks like business! There’s old Gibbons tying his man’s colours to the ropes. Crimson and orange, you see. Cribb sports the old blue bird’s eye. Ha, there’s John Gully! Cribb must have arrived! Who is his bottle-holder, I wonder? They’ll be throwing their castors in the ring any moment now. Cribb was lying at the Blue Bull on Witham Common last night, and I believe Molyneux was at the Ram

Jam. Can't make out why they're behind time. Lord, listen to them cheering! That must be Cribb sure enough! Yes, there he goes! He has Joe Ward with him. He must be his bottle-holder. Looks to be in fine feather, don't he? I've laid a monkey on him, and another he gives the first knock-down. The only thing is that he *is* slow. No denying it. But excellent bottom, never shy at all.'

The Champion's hat had been tossed into the ring by now, and he had followed it, and was acknowledging with a broad smile, and a wave of his hand, the cheers and yells of encouragement that greeted him. He was an inch and a half taller than the Black, a heavy-looking fighter, but neat on his feet. He did indeed look to be in fine feather, but so, too, did Molyneux, emerging from his greatcoat. The Black had an enormous reach, and huge muscular development. He looked a formidable customer, but the betting was steady at three to one on Cribb.

In another few moments the seconds and bottle-holders left the ring, and at eighteen minutes past twelve precisely (as Mr Fitzjohn verified by a glance at his watch) the fight began.

For about a minute both men sparred cautiously, then Cribb made play right and left, and Molyneux returning slightly to the head, a brisk rally followed. The Champion put in a blow to the throat, and Molyneux fell.

'Nothing to choose between 'em, so far,' said Mr Fitzjohn wisely. 'Mere flourishing. But Cribb always starts slow. Stands well up, don't he?'

At setting-to again the Champion showed first blood, at the mouth, and immediately a brisk rally commenced. Cribb put in a good hit with his right; Molyneux returned like lightning on the head with the left flush, and some quick fighting followed at half-arm. They closed, and after a fierce struggle the Black threw Cribb a cross-buttock.

Mr Fitzjohn, who had risen from his seat in his excitement, sat down again, and said there was nothing in it. Peregrine, observing the Champion's right eye to be nearly closed from the last rally, could not but feel that Molyneux was getting the best

of it. He had a tremendous punch, fought with marked ferocity, and seemed quicker than Cribb.

The third round opened with some sparring for wind; then Cribb put in a doubler to the body which pushed Molyneux away. A roar went up from the crowd, but the Black kept his legs, and rushed in again. For one and a half minutes there was some quick, fierce fighting; then they closed once more, and again Molyneux threw Cribb.

‘The Black will win!’ Peregrine exclaimed. ‘He fights like a tiger! I’ll lay you two to one in ponies the Black wins!’

‘Done!’ said Mr Fitzjohn promptly, though he looked a trifle anxious.

In the fourth round Molyneux continued fighting at the head, and putting in some flush hits, drew blood. Mr Fitzjohn began to fidget, for it was seen that both Cribb’s eyes were damaged. Molyneux, however, seemed to be in considerable distress, his great chest heaving, and the sweat pouring off him. The Champion was smiling, but the round ended in his falling again.

Peregrine was quite sure the Black must win, and could not understand how seven to four in favour of Cribb could still be offered.

‘Pooh, Cribb hasn’t begun yet!’ said Mr Fitzjohn stoutly. ‘The Black’s looking as queer as Dick’s hat-band already.’

‘Look at Cribb’s face!’ retorted Peregrine.

‘Lord, there’s nothing in the Black having drawn his cork. He’s fighting at the head all the time. But watch Cribb going for the mark, that’s what I say. He’ll mill his man down yet, though I don’t deny the Black shows game.’

Both men rattled in well up to time in the next round, but Molyneux had decidedly the best of the rally. Cribb fell, and a roar of angry disapproval went up from the crowd. There were some shouts of ‘Foul!’ and for a few moments it seemed as though the ring was to be stormed.

‘I think the Black hit him as he fell,’ said Mr Fitzjohn. ‘I think that must have been it. Jackson makes no sign, you see; it can’t have been a foul blow, or he would.’

The disturbance died down as both fighters came up to the mark for the sixth round. It was now obvious that Molyneux was greatly distressed for wind. Cribb was still full of gaiety. He avoided a rather wild lunge to left and right, and threw in a blow to the body. Molyneux managed to stop it, but was doubled up immediately by a terrific blow at the neck. He got away, but was dreadfully cut up.

‘What did I tell you?’ cried Mr Fitzjohn. ‘Good God, the Black’s as sick as a horse! He’s all abroad! Cribb has him on the run!’

The blow seemed indeed to have shaken the Black up badly. He was hitting short, dancing about the ring in a way that provoked the rougher part of the crowd to jeers and yells of laughter. Cribb followed him round the ring, and floored him by a hit at full arm’s length.

The odds being offered rose to five to one, and Mr Fitzjohn could scarcely keep his seat for excitement. ‘The next round ends it!’ he said. ‘The Black’s lost in rage!’

He was wrong, however. Molyneux came up to time, and charged in, planting one or two blows. Cribb put in some straight hits at the throat, stepping back after each. The Black bored in, fell, but whether from a hit or from exhaustion neither Peregrine nor Mr Fitzjohn could see.

Richmond got Molyneux up to time again. He rallied gamely, but his distance was ill-judged. Cribb did much as he liked with him, got his head into chancery, and fibbed till he fell.

‘Lombard Street to a China orange!’ exclaimed Mr Fitzjohn. ‘Ay, you can see how Richmond and Bill Gibbons are working on him, but it’s my belief he’s done . . . No, by God, he’s coming up to the mark again! Damme, the fellow’s got excellent bottom, say what you will! But he’s dead-beat, Taverner. Wonder Richmond don’t throw the towel in. . . . Hey, that’s finished him! What a left! Enough to break his jaw!’

The Black had gone down like a log. He was dragged to his corner, apparently insensible, and it seemed impossible that he could recover in the half-minute. But Cribb, who, in spite of his

disfigured countenance, seemed as full of gaiety as ever, gave away his chance, and hugely delighted the crowd by dancing a hornpipe round the stage.

Molyneux got off his second's knee, but it was obvious that he could do no more. He made a game attempt to rally, but fell almost at once.

'I believe Cribb did break his jaw,' said Mr Fitzjohn, who was watching the Black closely. 'Damn it, the man's done! Richmond ought to throw in the towel. No sport in this! Lord, he's up again, full of pluck! No, he's done for! There'll be no getting him on his feet again. Ah, you see – Richmond knows it! He's going to throw in his towel.' Here Mr Fitzjohn broke off to join in the cheering.

On the stage the Champion, and Gully, his second, were engaged in dancing a Scotch reel to announce the victory. Peregrine joined Mr Fitzjohn in waving his hat in the air, and cheering, and sat down again feeling that he had seen a great fight. The knowledge that he had lost quite a large sum of money on it did not weigh with him in the least. He exchanged cards with Mr Fitzjohn, accepted some advice from that knowledgeable young gentleman on the best hotel to put up at in London, promised to call on him in Cork Street to pay his debts at the first opportunity, and parted from him with the agreeable conviction that he now had at least one acquaintance in London.

Three

Miss Taverner spent a pleasant morning exploring the town. There was scarcely anyone about, and that circumstance, coupled with the fineness of the weather, tempted her to take another stroll after her luncheon of cakes and wine. There was nothing to do at the George beyond sit at her bedroom window and wait for Peregrine's return, and this prospect did not commend itself to her. Walking about the town had not tired her, and she understood from the chambermaid that Great Ponton church, only three miles from Grantham, was generally held to be worth a visit. Miss Taverner decided to walk there, and set out a little before midday, declining the escort of her maid.

The walk was a pretty one, and a steep climb up the highroad into the tiny village of Great Ponton quite rewarded Miss Taverner for her energy. A fine burst of country met her eyes, and a few steps down a by-road brought her to the church, a very handsome example of later perpendicular work, with a battlemented tower, and a curious weathervane in the form of a fiddle upon one of its pinnacles. There was no one of whom she could inquire the history of this odd vane, so after exploring the church, and resting a little while on a bench outside, she set out to walk back to Grantham.

At the bottom of the hill leading out of the village a pebble became lodged in her right sandal and after a very little way began to make walking an uncomfortable business. Miss Taverner wriggled her toes in an effort to shift the stone, but it would not

answer. Unless she wished to limp all the way to Grantham she must take off her shoe and shake the pebble out. She hesitated, for she was upon the highroad and had no wish to be discovered in her stockings by any chance wayfarer. One or two carriages had passed her already: she supposed them to be returning from Thistleton Gap: but at the moment there was nothing in sight. She sat down on the bank at the side of the road, and pulled up her frilled skirt an inch or two to come at the strings of her sandal. As ill-luck would have it these had worked themselves into a knot which took her some minutes to untie. She had just succeeded in doing this, and was shaking out the pebble, when a curricule-and-four came into sight, travelling at a brisk pace towards Grantham.

Miss Taverner thrust the sandal behind her and hurriedly let down her skirts, but not, she felt uneasily, before the owner of the curricule must have caught a glimpse of her shapely ankle. She picked up her parasol, which she had allowed to fall at the foot of the bank, and pretended to be interested in the contemplation of the opposite side of the road.

The curricule drew alongside, and checked. Miss Taverner cast a fleeting glance upwards at it, and stiffened. The curricule stopped. 'Beauty in distress again?' inquired a familiar voice.

Miss Taverner would have given all she possessed in the world to have been able to rise up and walk away in the opposite direction. It was not in her power, however. She could only tuck her foot out of sight and affect to be quite deaf.

The curricule drew right in to the side of the road, and at a sign from its driver the tiger perched up behind jumped down and ran to the wheel-horses' heads. Miss Taverner raged inwardly, and turned her head away.

The curricule's owner descended in a leisurely fashion, and came up to her. 'Why so diffident?' he asked. 'You had plenty to say when I met you yesterday?'

Miss Taverner turned to look at him. Her cheeks had reddened, but she replied without the least sign of shyness: 'Be pleased to drive on, sir. I have nothing to say to you, and my affairs are not your concern.'

‘That – or something very like it – is what you said to me before,’ he remarked. ‘Tell me, are you even prettier when you smile? I’ve no complaint to make, none at all: the whole effect is charming – and found at Grantham too, of all unlikely places! – but I should like to see you without the scowl.’

Miss Taverner’s eyes flashed.

‘Magnificent!’ said the gentleman. ‘Of course, blondes are not precisely the fashion, but you are something quite out of the way, you know.’

‘You are insolent, sir!’ said Miss Taverner.

He laughed. ‘On the contrary, I am being excessively polite.’

She looked him full in the eyes. ‘If my brother had been with me you would not have accosted me in this fashion,’ she said.

‘Certainly not,’ he agreed, quite imperturbably. ‘He would have been very much in the way. What is your name?’

‘Again, sir, that is no concern of yours.’

‘A mystery,’ he said. ‘I shall have to call you Clorinda. May I put on your shoe for you?’

She gave a start; her cheeks flamed. ‘No!’ she said chokingly. ‘You may do nothing for me except drive on!’

‘Why, that is easily done!’ he replied, and bent, and before she had time to realise his purpose, lifted her up in his arms, and walked off with her to his curricule.

Miss Taverner ought to have screamed, or fainted. She was too much surprised to do either; but as soon as she had recovered from her astonishment at being picked up in that easy way (as though she had been a featherweight, which she knew she was not) she dealt her captor one resounding slap, with the full force of her arm behind it.

He winced a little, but his arms did not slacken their hold; rather they tightened slightly. ‘Never hit with an open palm, Clorinda,’ he told her. ‘I will show you how in a minute. Up with you!’

Miss Taverner was tossed up into the curricule, and collapsed on to the seat in some disorder. The gentleman in the caped greatcoat picked up her parasol and gave it to her, took the

sandal from her resistless grasp, and calmly held it ready to fit on to her foot.

To struggle for possession of it would be an undignified business; to climb down from the curricle was impossible. Miss Taverner, quivering with temper, put out her stockinged foot.

He slipped the sandal on, and tied the string.

‘Thank you!’ said Miss Taverner with awful civility. ‘Now if you will give me your hand out of your carriage I may resume my walk.’

‘But I am not going to give you my hand,’ he said. ‘I am going to drive you back to Grantham.’

His tone provoked her to reply disdainfully: ‘You may think that a great honour, sir, but —’

‘It is a great honour,’ he said. ‘I never drive females.’

‘No,’ said his tiger suddenly. ‘Else I wouldn’t be here. Not a minute I wouldn’t.’

‘Henry, you see, is a misogynist,’ explained the gentleman, apparently not in the least annoyed by this unceremonious interruption.

‘I am not interested in you or in your servant!’ snapped Miss Taverner.

‘That is what I like in you,’ he agreed, and sprang lightly up into the curricle, and stepped across her to the box-seat. ‘Now let me show you how to hit me.’

Miss Taverner resisted, but he possessed himself of her gloved hand and doubled it into a fist. ‘Keep your thumb down so, and hit like that. Not at my chin, I think. Aim for the eye, or the nose, if you prefer.’

Miss Taverner sat rigid.

‘I won’t retaliate,’ he promised. Then, as she still made no movement, he said: ‘I see I shall have to offer you provocation,’ and swiftly kissed her.

Miss Taverner’s hands clenched into two admirable fists, but she controlled an unladylike impulse, and kept them in her lap. She was both shaken and enraged by the kiss, and hardly knew where to look. No other man than her father or Peregrine had

ever dared to kiss her. At a guess she supposed the gentleman to have written her down as some country tradesman's daughter from a Queen's Square boarding school. Her old-fashioned dress was to blame, and no doubt that abominable gig. She wished she did not blush so hotly, and said with as much scorn as she could throw into her voice: 'Even a dandy might remember the civility due to a gentlewoman. I shall not hit you.'

'I am disappointed,' he said. 'There is nothing for it but to go in search of your brother. Stand away, Henry.'

The tiger sprang back, and ran to scramble up on to his perch again. The curricule moved forward, and in another minute was bowling rapidly along the road towards Grantham.

'You may set me down at the George, sir,' said Miss Taverner coldly. 'No doubt if my brother is come back from the fight he will oblige you in the way, I, alas, am not able to do.'

He laughed. 'Hit me, do you mean? All things are possible, Clorinda, though some are – unlikely, let us say.'

She folded her lips, and for a while did not speak. Her companion maintained a flow of languid conversation until she interrupted him, impelled by curiosity to ask him the question in her mind. 'Why did you wish to drive me into Grantham?'

He glanced down at her rather mockingly. 'Just to annoy you, Clorinda. The impulse was irresistible, believe me.'

She took refuge in silence again, for she could find no adequate words with which to answer him. She had never been spoken to so in her life; she was more than a little inclined to think him mad.

Grantham came into sight; in a few minutes the curricule drew up outside the George, and the first thing Miss Taverner saw was her brother's face above the blind in one of the lower windows.

The gentleman descended from the curricule, and held up his hand for her to take. 'Do smile!' he said.

Miss Taverner allowed him to help her down, but preserved an icy front. She swept into the inn ahead of him, and nearly collided with Peregrine, hurrying out to meet her. 'Judith! What