

THE SOUL OF JOHN SWINNERTON.

(BY SOL. N. SHERIDAN.)

THERE had always been something peculiar about John Swinnerton. It was not that he was at all a disagreeable man for his peculiarities. He was rather a loveable fellow, indeed. But you felt when with him somehow an uncanny sensation such as would come to you in the presence of a splendid animal unchained, free to do you great bodily injury and with no restraint upon it other than its own whim. He was just a splendid animal, with an animal's splendid beauty. A man, tall and fair, and strong, with the yellow hair and blue eyes of a Viking and a Viking's recklessness of consequences. He was a laughing animal, good natured as all animals are when not crossed—but he had the animal repute that he would be dangerous to offend and the animal's perfect lack of accountability.

Not that this came to you all at once upon meeting him. It was a vague impression of it all at first, like a shadow upon water, and it deepened as shadows will as the acquaintance grew, or as impressions slowly deepen in soft wax. I have a theory that we glimpse the whole character of a man we meet at the first impression. After that we grow to like or dislike him, but we will find at the end that the first impression is the correct impression. The evil which is in a man appeals to some evil in ourselves, or the good which is in him affords some good in ourselves, and we later grow to like or dislike him, as it may be, against our true judgment of his character, which is instinctive judgment. There is given to every human being, for its self-preservation, the faculty of looking just once into the soul of every other. After that come the conventions, and conventions destroy instincts.

John Swinnerton impressed all men with that lack of accountability, and was in all respects the most perfectly pleasant man to meet when you rubbed him the right way I have ever known. He was dealing faro at the Oriental, in Phoenix, when I first saw him, sitting behind the box in his shirt sleeves, a white shirt of immaculate cleanliness and immaculate stiffness, with one great diamond blazing in its broad front and a pale pink tie falling on either side of the diamond, a light red sash, black broadcloth trousers, high-heeled, patent leather boots and a white slouch hat of the style affected by artists. Of such is full dress in Arizona, where the games run wide open and where every man in town thinks no evil of backing the turn of a card.

John Swinnerton turned deuce seven and a swarthy hand, the hand of a Mexican gambler from El Paso, shot out across the board to pick up a bet. In an instant there was a gleam of steel, and a long knife, quivering as it stood upright in the board, had pinned the Mexican's hand to the top of the table.

'You sure grab no sleepers in this game, Pete,' Swinnerton said coolly, and he turned out a couple of cards.

The Mexican's whole body writhed in agony. It was as cruel a thing as I ever saw, but what followed was more cruel. John Swinnerton, after the next turn, reached over and plucked his knife from the Mexican's bleeding hand, coolly as he would have plucked it from the body of a trussed fowl, wiped the blade deliberately across the man's face, and went on dealing—and the

look of hate that leaped into the detected chest's eyes was such as is not seen often, thank God, in the eyes of human beings. The devils in hell may look that way sometimes when a sinner repents on the gallows and so escapes the direct part of his punishment.

I asked John Swinnerton, a week later, when I knew him better, for one makes friends fast on the frontier and loses them fast, whether he had no fear of this Mexican gambler, whom I had observed still lurked about the gambling hells of the town, though he did not come into the Oriental.

Swinnerton laughed and I noticed a lift of the upper lip, showing a row of white teeth like a wolf's. 'Afraid of El Paso Pete? Not on yer life, son. A man don't deal no faro more ef he's afraid of every greaser that sets into his game to pick up sleepers.'

I discovered, by the way, that John Swinnerton was a man of education, who had fallen into the gambler's manner of talking, perhaps as a disguise at first, but who kept it up because from long use and from long disuse of better things it had come to be second nature with him. He did not tell me this, nor any of it. It was more from what he did not tell that I found out so much. John Swinnerton was from what he did not tell that if the easy intimacies of Western towns may go for friendship, but he made no more confidences than any other animal might.

I believe he was the only man I ever saw who was utterly without a conscience. Let me give one more instance. We were going home early one morning, just at gray dawn in fact, after he had closed his game and after I had ventured my last dollar on the red at roulette and lost. We lived at the same hotel, for they had Lotels at Phoenix even in the earliest days, and it was natural enough we should walk down the street together. We had gone, perhaps, a couple of blocks from the Oriental. The street was deserted, but from houses in the town here and there thin spirals of smoke were beginning to curl, showing that even in that wild region were early risers. We reached the corner below our hotel, when a woman came rapidly out of the side street, such women as are all too plentiful even in more civilized regions than the frontier, and stopped before us.

'John,' she said. 'Oh, John; my God!'

That was all, but the pathos in her voice and in her face and in her wild eyes and her tumbling hair would have stirred the heart, it seems to me, of any man born of woman. There was love in it all, wild, passionate love, and wilder and more passionate entreaty.

I stopped, naturally, and John Swinnerton stopped also. There was in his face or in his manner not one sign of pity, but I saw the lip rise a little over the white teeth, as I had seen it do before. Then, deliberately, he threw out his fist and struck her between the eyes, a cruel blow. 'Curse you,' he said; 'Did I not tell you never to speak to me without permission?'

She fell at his feet, unconscious and bleeding, and without once looking back, he walked deliberately across her body to his hotel. Naturally I raised her up, and naturally, also, I received a torrent of what could hardly be called thanks from her lips so soon as she recovered consciousness by reason of the water I dashed in her face from the little stream running under the cottonwoods that lined the sidewalk; but women are like that. No doubt I would have fared even worse at her hands had I sought to stay the blow before it was delivered, as I could not have done, not suspecting it. Even

as it was I feared I had earned John Swinnerton's enmity by reason of the tongue-lashing I gave him, but I might have spared myself uneasiness and the six shooter I loaded so carefully before going up to the Oriental the next night. John Swinnerton bore me no more malice than any other animal might. It would have gone hard with me, no doubt, if I had interferred between him and the woman at the moment of striking. So it goes hard with any man who comes between the tiger and its prey. When the tiger is gorged it harbours no resentment. It was fortunate, perhaps, but it was also disappointing. I was human enough myself, at least, to desire no more of the society of John Swinnerton than the necessary propinquity in so small a town would force upon me. I knew by that street scene in the yellowish gray of the early morning if John Swinnerton had fallen from better things somewhere it was because he deserved to fall.

And yet, by some power—possibly curiosity, possibly a desire to study a type I had never met before, possibly a perfectly human tendency to tease wild animals—this disinclination for his company overcame itself, and I found myself once more seeking John Swinnerton's company. The man fascinated me. I went to the Oriental, I believe, solely because he dealt faro there, and when it was his watch off—for faro dealers work in watches, like coal miners—I spent a great deal more time in his company than was at all good for my moral health. It was by reason of a habit I formed of lounging into his room at the hotel, the coolest in the house, to smoke a cigar after dinner and before he went to the saloon, that I had an experience which, in the light of what followed almost immediately afterwards, was decidedly uncanny. The hotel was an adobe, a one-story building, built around a court, in which there were palms and fig trees, and a fountain whose splash was cooling. On one side of this court were the kitchens and dining-rooms, and about the other three sides ran the sleeping rooms, a wide verandah answering for a corridor. The best of these rooms had both door and window opening upon the verandah, and, as a rule, door and window were both open. It was so of Swinnerton's room when, strolling along the verandah to smoke in his company, I heard voices coming through the open window, and stopped, naturally, not wishing to intrude when he might have a visitor. Where I stood, leaning against one of the posts supporting the verandah roof, I could see at an angle into the room, and without at all meaning to spy upon him, I saw John Swinnerton standing in the middle of the room, and talking down, if you will understand what that means, to some smaller person standing or sitting before him, but whom I could not see. These words came to me through the open window, and I could feel the lifting of the upper lip and the gleam of the white teeth, though Swinnerton's back was toward me:

'Why should I be like other men? Is a man happier that he regrets?'

What the other said I could not hear, but there was the same sneer in Swinnerton's voice, as I heard it again: 'Conscience. Why prate of conscience? I live, do I not? One life is enough at a time.'

He turned as he spoke, and coming towards the window, saw the gleam of my cigar in the shadows. 'Ah,' he said, in an entirely different tone, 'I was waiting for you. Come in.'

I walked towards the open door, and had scarce time



Ferrier, photo.

THE 'LODGE,' 'GREEN HAYES,' SOUTH CANTERBURY, N.Z.