

# The Gambler.

## A Tale of a Peppermint Lozenge.

THEIR tickets of admission were in order, and the magnificent attendant flung back with an air the great doors of the gambling saloon.

Mr. and Mrs. Charles Robinson, of Robinson's Meat Stores, Clapham, S.W., passed through, thrilled; and, each with an eye on the other, realised that they had passed for ever beyond those narrow bounds that confine the life of Clapham, S.W.

In the emotion of the moment Mr. Robinson took from his waistcoat pocket one of the peppermint lozenges he was accustomed to carry there, and swallowed it whole, while Mrs. Robinson looked round her with an air that said plainly that in all Clapham there was nothing like this nothing at all.

"Charles," she said in an awed whisper, "Charles, you won't gamble?"

"Certainly I shall," answered Mr. Robinson with superb calm.

And he walked straight towards the nearest table. Mrs. Robinson followed. Mr. Robinson turned round and looked at her, and this look meant that he was a fine, dashing, reckless fellow who cared nothing for the prejudices and scruples of Clapham, S.W., and Mrs. Robinson looked back at him, and this look meant that she knew he was a fine, dashing, reckless fellow, but that she wished he cared a little—oh, a very little—the tiniest little in the world—for the prejudices and the scruples of Clapham, S.W.

After all, this adventure and excursion on the continent of Europe over, they would have to return there to preside over the destinies of those prosperous Meat Stores in the Lower Road. Unflinchingly Mr. Robinson watched the game, and was quite fascinated by the small, dancing ball. It reminded him of one he had seen once at Margate, dancing on the top of a jet of water, whence he had endeavoured vainly to dislodge it at a penny a shot.

The person seated in the chair in front of him placed a gold coin on the table. A moment or two later the croupier pushed towards the lucky punter a small heap of money.

Mr. Robinson's eyes nearly bulged from his head as he saw this swept negligently into the pockets of the player, who thereupon rose and left the table.

Acting with that decision which has made his business perhaps the best known in Clapham, Mr. Robinson instantly seated himself in the vacant place.

Having done so he could not help glancing round to see if Mrs. Robinson were watching. She was appalled, and the same thought flashed into both their minds—what would the pastor and deacons of the Baptist Church they attended say if only they could see them now!

Mrs. Robinson went pale at the thought. Why, it would mean social ruin, and probably affect the business as well. Mrs. Robinson looked inquiringly at Mr. Robinson's back. Mr. Robinson's back indicated that he did not care. Mrs. Robinson gasped and reflected that till now it seemed she had not really known her Charles, and that evidently Fate, in making a successful butcher at Clapham, S.W., had spoiled a first-rate pirate-buccaner-adventurer. And she experienced a feeling of warm gratitude towards Fate for having done so, for though less picturesque, it is undoubtedly more comfortable to be a prosperous butcher in Clapham rather than a pirate-buccaner-adventurer elsewhere.

Mr. Robinson placed a sovereign on the exact spot where his predecessor had laid his coin. But, alas! precedent failed; for Mr. Robinson, happening to remove for a moment the severe eye with which he had watched it, the croupier saw his chance and flicked it away with his wooden rake.

"Oh, Charles!" murmured Mrs. Robinson from behind.

Pale, but firm, Mr. Robinson placed another sovereign on the same spot. This time he did not remove his glance

from it for even a second, but the croupier gave it a passing flick, and Mr. Robinson was paler even than before as he saw it added to the pile of a neighbour into whose pocket it straightway vanished.

Mr. Robinson, with an awful calm, placed another sovereign on the same spot. The thought in his mind was that he would show these foreigners what was what. He doubted if there was one among them who knew a prime cut of beef when he saw it. The croupier gathered in the third sovereign, and Mrs. Robinson fell rather than sat upon the nearest lounge.

"Charles," she whispered, "Oh Charles!"

"I will not leave this table," said Mr. Robinson turning to look at her, his voice vibrant with superb defiance, "while I have one penny left."

Mrs. Robinson gasped. She could not help admiring him when he spoke like this, even though he said such awful things. For she knew well that he had brought with him from their hotel no less than £10 in gold, and it was terrible to think he could be so wild and reckless and announce his determination to risk and perhaps lose the whole of that sum. She put her handkerchief to her face, which had grown damp.

"It's awful," she said aloud, and a perfectly-dressed gentleman who was standing near heard her as he had heard her husband's remark, and he looked at them both with a certain uneasiness.

Mr. Robinson placed two more sovereigns on the table. What annoyed him most was the casual way in which the croupier flicked them away, just as though, Mr. Robinson thought with indignation, he was quite used to winning good British gold like this, whereas, Mr. Robinson thought, he had probably never seen as much before in all his life, nor good British beef at all.

Unable to watch such terrible proceedings any longer, Mrs. Robinson hid her face in her hands. For she had no longer hope or illusion, and she thought no more of that new silver tea-pot she had been promised if Mr. Robinson performed the feat he had heard of but, only dimly understood, known as "breaking the bank." She now knew well that he was destined to lose to this gang of foreigners the whole of his £10, as much, that is, as the prosperous Clapham meat stores earned in three or four busy days. Is it any wonder that her despair showed so plainly on her features that the impeccably-dressed gentleman who was watching them felt his worst fears confirmed.

Now, grown cunning by the rude teaching of adversity, Mr. Robinson placed three sovereigns on the table, each in a different division. It seemed to him impossible that all should lose, but zero came up, and the impassive croupier swept the board and actually yawned as he did so. It was as much indignation at this yawn as anger at his losses that made Mr. Robinson look so tragic as he turned to glance palely at his pale wife, and then slammed two more sovereigns on the table anywhere, while the perfectly-dressed gentleman looking on seemed more thoughtful than ever.

This outlooker, who was one of the officials of the rooms, was saying to himself that he knew this stage when the desperate gambler throws down his stakes without caring where they lie, and he was also thinking that Mr. Robinson was plainly an Englishman, and somehow there is always more fuss made about a desperate act by an Englishman than about the members of any other nationality. This struck the irreproachably dressed gentleman as most unfair, but nevertheless the fact has to be taken into account. Meanwhile, Mr. Robinson watched two more sovereigns swept away.

The profits of four or five day's honest—more or less honest, that is, for Mr. Robinson did occasionally pretend that "home killed" and "home bred" mean the same thing—trading were gone to make a foreigner's holiday, flicked away as lightly and easily as Mr. Robinson flicked bluebottles out of his ice-chest,

pocketed as though good British gold counted for no more than francs and thalers.

No wonder that Mr. Robinson was pale, no wonder Mrs. Robinson trembled where she sat, no wonder the exquisitely dressed gentleman watched them both and meditated gloomily on the cost of a third-class ticket back to London.

Mr. Robinson had lost his £10, but he still had thirty shillings left which he had brought with him for the other expenses of the day. These coins he placed with care and deliberation on one number. Another turned up, and the croupier's rake passed lightly over Mr. Robinson's money and it was not.

"My last penny gone," said Mr. Robinson with a groan of grief and rage; and while the superbly dressed gentleman watched him closely he rose from the table, made a gesture that was like despair, but that meant how superior was Clapham, S.W., to all foreign parts and then drawing a small white peppermint lozenge from his pocket he swiftly swallowed it for consolation.

An innocent action apparently, but instantly the elegantly dressed one howled and fell upon him; and summoned by his howl, four large and stalwart attendants dashed up. One Mr. Robinson landed a true British punch upon the nose, and one he hucked on the shin and made him lame; but the galat four were heroes and flinched not. They gathered him into their arms and bore him, kicking and struggling and using such language as Clapham little dreamed he knew, into a small adjoining room, whither the admirably dressed gentleman had excitedly preceded them.

Paralysed, Mrs. Robinson sat and watched this extraordinary scene, and saw her Charles borne away, and noted his left foot waded wildly in the air—a pathetic touch.

A passing thought came to her that all this was what was to be expected in foreign parts, and then she heard a word whispered through the excited crowd around, and this word was: "Poison."

She snorted and charged, and they scattered before her, and well for them it was they did so. In the adjoining room she found the beautifully dressed gentleman, a breathless doctor hastily summoned, and the four attendants nursing and comparing their several wounds, and her Charles pale and wan upon a couch, for, indeed, what he had experienced had been like unto the crossing from Dover to Calais in bad weather, only more so.

The supremely well-dressed gentleman, the doctor, the four attendants all bowed in unison to Mrs. Robinson.

"How it was strong," said the exquisitely attired one, lifting his hands in admiration, "how it was effectual. Now he is empty, but now he is safe."

"Heaven save me from all foreigners," said Mrs. Robinson fervently, for, indeed, she believed that they were all mad together.

"It is I, madame, I," answered simply the gentleman of the beautiful clothes, "I who save the foreigners. It is for that that I am here employed. When they have lost their all—as Monsieur here—when they fly to the knife, the rope, the poison—as Monsieur here—then it is I who have them from the suicide, and pay their third class fares back to their homes."

"Poison," screamed Mrs. Robinson, "poison—why, they are the best peppermint lozenges in Clapham."

"The best in Clapham," groaned Mr. Robinson, and suddenly he leaped to his feet, for his spirit was yet unbroken, and he hurled himself upon that well-dressed and smiling gentleman who, having directed all these things, had now so rashly explained, and he took him by the collar with one hand, and with the other he crammed a whole fistful of peppermint lozenges down his throat.

"The best in Clapham," he shouted. "Poison!—I'll show 'em."

The lozenges were truly the best to be had in all Clapham, and they were not weak. The irreproachably dressed one fell upon the floor and writhed, knowing he was poisoned indeed. More peppermints in hand, Mr. Robinson stood like a lion and glared around, and wondered down whose throat to thrust them next. Mrs. Robinson screamed. The four attendants fled. The doctor bowed himself zealously with the writhing unfortunate on the floor, and Mr. Robinson experienced a sweet and tender joy as he watched another go through that same devastating and emptying process he himself had already known.

Explanations ensued—complicated, extensive, but finally satisfactory explanations—and the next day Mr. Robinson and the no longer impeccable and elegant one passed each other on the terrace with merely a glance of inextinguishable hate.

But this year Mr. and Mrs. Robinson intend to pass their summer holiday at Margate. No more foreign trips for them.—By E. R. Punsbon, in "London Opinion."

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