

Albert Payson Terhune



The Fighter

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CHAPTER I

CALEB CONOVER WINS

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The red-haired man was fighting.

He had always been fighting. The square jaw, the bull neck proclaimed him of the battling breed; even before one had scope to note the alert, light eyes, the tight mouth, the short, broad hands with their stubby strength of finger.

In prize ring, in mediaeval battlefield, in 'longshore tavern, Caleb Conover would have slugged his way to supremacy. In business he won as readily—and by like methods. His was not only the force but also the supreme craft of the fighter. Therefore he was president, instead of bouncer, in the offices of the C. G. & X. Railroad.

It was not railroad business that engrossed Conover as he sat at his desk one day in early spring: tearing open a ceaseless series of telegrams, scribbling replies, ringing now and then for a messenger to whom he gave a curt order.

Telegrams and messages ceased. In the lull, Conover jumped to his feet and began to walk back and forth. His big hands were clenched, his head thrust forward, his whole muscle-bound body tense.

Then began a violent ringing from the long-distance telephone in the far corner of the room. Conover picked up the receiver, grunted a question, then listened. For nearly five minutes he stood thus, the receiver at his ear, his broad, freckled face impassive save for a growing fire in the pale, alert eyes. A grunt of dismissal and the receiver was hung on its hook.

Conover crossed the room, threw himself into a big creaking chair, cocked his feet on the window sill, drew out and lighted a fat cigar. The tenseness was gone. His whole heavy body was relaxed. He smoked mechanically and let his gaze rove with dull inertness over the blank wall across the street. He was resting as hard as he had fought.

A clerk timidly opened the door leading from the outer offices.

“Mr. Caine, sir,” ventured the employee, “He says he—”

“Send him in,” vouchsafed Conover without turning his head.

His eyes were still fixed in unseeing comfort on the wall, when his guest entered. Nor did he shift his glance without visible reluctance. The newcomer seemingly was used to his host’s lack of cordiality. For, favoring Conover with a slight nod, he deposited his hat, gloves and stick on the table and lighted a cigarette, before speaking.

Conover surveyed the well-groomed figure of his visitor with an air of disparaging appraisal that reached its climax as he noted the cigarette.

“Here!” he suggested, “Throw away that paper link between fire and a fool, and smoke real tobacco. Try one of these cigars if you want to. They’ll fit your mouth a lot better. Why does a grown man smoke a—?”

“This grown man,” replied Caine, unruffled, “has a way of doing what he chooses. I came to see if you were ready to go to your execution.”

“Execution, eh?” grinned Conover. “Well, it’s just on the books that there *may* be a little executin’ done, up there.

But / won't be the gent with his head on the block. Besides, you're an hour early."

"I know I am. It's an ideal day for work. So I haven't done any. I left the office ahead of time and came to see if I could lure you into a walk before we go to the Club. You don't seem much worried over the outcome."

"Why should I be? I'll win. I always win."

"Conover," said Caine, observing his friend with the condescendingly interested air of a visitor at the Zoo, "If I had your sublime conceit I'd be President of the United States or the richest man in America, or some other such odious personage whose shoes we all secretly fear we may some day fill."

"President? Richest man?" repeated Conover, mildly attracted by the dual idea. "Give me time and I'll likely be both. I've made a little start on the second already, to-day."

"Won another fight?" queried Caine.

"Yes, a big one. The biggest yet, by far."

"Nothing to do with Steeloid, I suppose!" suggested the visitor, a note of real concern peering through his customary air of amused calm.

"All about Steeloid," returned Conover. "The Independent Steeloid Company is incorp'rated at last. Cap'talized at—"

"The Independent! That means a slump in our U. S. Steeloid! You call that winning a fight? I thought—"

"You'd be better off, Caine, if you'd leave the thinkin' part of these things to me. Thinkin' is my game. Not yours. You talk about 'our' U. S. Steeloid. You seem to forget I swing seventy-two per cent. of the stock and you own just what I let you in on."

“Never mind all that,” interposed Caine. “If the Independents are banded together, they’ll make things warm for us.”

“Not enough to cause any hurry call for electric fans, I guess,” chuckled Conover. “If you’ll stop ‘thinkin’ a minute or two an’ listen to me, I’ll try to explain. An’ maybe I can hammer into your head a few of the million things you don’t know about finance. Here’s the idea. I built up the Steeloid Trust, didn’t I? And Blacarda and his crowd who had been running a bunch of measly third-rate Steeloid companies, set up a squeal because I could undersell ‘em.”

“Go on,” urged Caine. “I know all that. You needn’t take a running start with your lesson in high finance. We’ll take it for granted that I read at least the newspaper I own and that I know Blacarda has been trying to organize the independent companies against you. What next?”

“Well, they’re organized. Only Blacarda didn’t do it. A high-souled philanthropic geezer that worked through agents, jumped in an’ combined all the independent companies against us an’ got ‘em to give him full voting power on all their stock. Put themselves into his hands entirely, you see, for the fight against my Steeloid Trust. Then this noble hearted trust buster incorporated the Independents. The deal went through to-day. I got final word on it just now. The Independents are organized. The votes on every share of their stock is in the control of one man.”

“But he’ll—”

“An’ that ‘one man,’” resumed the Fighter, “happens to be Caleb Conover.”

“But,” gasped the dumbfounded Caine, “I don’t understand.”

“Caine,” protested Conover, gently, “if all the things you don’t understand about finance was to be placed end to end—like they say in the Sunday ‘features’ of your paper,—they’d reach from here to Blacarda’s chances of swingin’ the Independent Steeloid Company. An’ that’s a long sight farther than twice around the world. What I’m gettin’ at is this: I went to work on the quiet an’ formed that Independent Combine. Then I gave it to myself as a present. It is now part of my U. S. Steeloid Company. Or will be as soon as I can strangle the Legislature kick that Blacarda’s sure to put up.”

“I see now,” said Caine, slipping back into his armor of habitual calm, “and I take off my hat to you. Conover, you missed your calling when you failed to go into the safe breaking profession.”

“There’s more money in business,” replied Conover simply. “But now maybe you won’t lay awake nights worryin’ over your Steeloid stock. If it was worth 170 2-5 this morning it’ll be quoted at 250 before the month is out.”

“I don’t wonder you aren’t afraid of this afternoon’s ordeal,” observed Caine, “But Blacarda is on the Board of Governors.”

“So are you, for that matter,” said Conover, “and I guess the vote of the man who’s made rich by Steeloid will pair off with the vote of the man who’s broke by it.”

“I hope,” corrected Caine, “you don’t think it’s because of my Steeloid holdings that I’m backing you in this. I do it

because it amuses me to see the gyrations of the under dog. A sporting instinct, I suppose.”

“If you’re pickin’ *me* for the under dog,”—began Conover, but broke off to stare in disgust at the other’s upraised hand.

Caine was lifting his cigarette to his lips. Conover watched the lazily graceful gesture with more than his wonted contempt.

“Say, Caine,” he interrupted, “why in thunder do you make your nails look like a pink skatin’ rink?”

“If you mean, why do I have them manicured,” answered Caine, coolly, “it is absolutely none of your business.”

“Now I s’pose that’s what you’d call a snub,” ruminated Conover, “But it don’t answer the question. Pink nails all shined up like that may look first rate on a girl. But for a man thirty years old—with a mustache—Say, *why* do you do it?”

“Why do you wear a necktie?” countered Caine, “I admit it is a surpassingly ugly one. But why wear one at all? It doesn’t keep you warm. It has no use.”

“Clo’es don’t make a man,” stammered Conover, rather discomfited at the riposte, “But there’s no use creatin’ a disturbance by goin’ round without ’em. As for my necktie, it shows I ain’t a day laborer for one thing.”

“Well-groomed hands are just as certain a sign manual of another sort,” finished Caine.

“I don’t quite get your meanin’. If—”

“As a failure you would have been a success, Conover,” interrupted Caine, “But as a success you are in some ways a lamentable failure. To paraphrase your own inspired words,

if all the things you don't know about social usage were placed end to end—"

"They'd cover a mighty long list of measly useless information. What do I care for such rot?"

"That's what you're called on to explain this afternoon before the Governors of the Arareek Country Club," finished Caine rising. "Are you ready?"

"No, I'm going to stop at Desirée's for a few minutes, first. I want to tell her about my winnin' out against the Blacarda crowd. She knows Blacarda."

"Does she know finance?"

"As well as she knows Blacarda, I guess. An' neither of 'em enough to be 'specially int'rested. But she likes to hear about things I've done. I'll just drop 'round there on my way. Join you later at the Club."

"I'll walk as far as her door with you, if you like," suggested Caine, gathering up his hat and stick. "Then I'll go on and see what I can do with the Governors before the meeting. But I don't look forward to coercing many of them into sanity. They bear a pitifully strong family resemblance to the late lamented Bourbons. They 'learn nothing, forget nothing' and—"

"And they go your Bourbon gang one better," supplemented Conover, "by never havin' known anything to start with. Maybe I can give 'em an idea or two, though, before we're done. I used to boss Dago section hands, you know."

"You'll find this job rather more difficult, I fancy. A garlick-haloed section hand is a lamb compared to some of our

hardshell club governors. Why do you want to stay in the Club, anyhow? It seems to me—”

“In the first place because I won’t quit. Prov’dence loves a bulldog, but He hates a quitter. In the second place I want to feel I’ve as much right in that crowd as I have in Kerrigan’s saloon. I’ve made my way. This Steeloid shuffle ought to put me somewhere in the million class. An’ there’s more to come. Lots of it. I’m a railroad pres’dent, too. The C. G. & X. is a punk little one-horse railroad; but some day I’ll make it cover this whole State. The road was on it last legs when I got hold of it, and I’m making it what I choose to. Now, as a man with all that cash,—and a railroad president, to boot,—why ain’t I entitled to line up with the other big bugs of Granite? Tell me that. They don’t want me, maybe? Well, I’ll make ’em want me, before I’m done. Till then, they’ll take me whether they want me or not. Ain’t that sound logic?”

“As sound as a dynamite cartridge,” laughed Caine, “You’re a paradox! No, ‘paradox’ isn’t a fighting word, so don’t scowl. You have the Midas-gift of making everything you touch turn to solid cash, and making two dollars grow where one mortgage blank formerly bloomed. You have the secret of power. And, with it all, you stoop to crawl under the canvas into the Social Circus. Feet of clay!”

Caleb glanced furtively at his broad, shining boots, then, disdaining the allusion as past his discernment, answered:

“It’s my own game and I play it as I plan to. In one year from now you’ll see folks askin’ me to the same houses where *you’ve* been invited ever since your great

grandfather held down the job of 'First Land-owner' here, in the Revolution. See if I don't."

"Did you ever chance to read Longfellow's poem about the Rabbi—Ben Levi—who 'took the Kingdom of Heaven by violence?'" queried Caine.

"I don't read rhymes. Life's too short. What happened to him?"

"He didn't have a particularly pleasant time of it, as I remember. In fact, I believe the angels joined in a symphonic clamor for his expulsion. Not unlike the very worthy governors of the Arareek Country Club."

"H'm!" sniffed Conover in high contempt. "If the Rabbi person had took the trouble of postin' himself on those angels' pasts, he might a' got front-row seat in the choir instead of bein' throwed out."

"So *that's* the line you're going to take with the governors? I'm glad I decided to be there. It ought to prove amusing. But you don't seem to realize that even if you win, you won't be exactly beloved by them, in future."

"I'm not expectin' a loving cup with a round-robin of their names on it. Not just at first, anyhow. So don't waste any worry on me. The Club's only the first step, anyhow. The real fun's liable to come when I take another."

"*Festina lente!*" counseled Caine, "People have a way of forgetting a man is *nouveau riche* as long as he remembers it. But they remember it as soon as he forgets it. Is it discreet to ask what Miss Shevlin thinks of all this? Is she in sympathy with your social antics—I mean 'ambitions?'"

"I don't know. I never asked her. I never thought to. But if I did, she'd stand for it. You see, not bein' as old and as wise

as some of the Granite folks, she's fallen into the habit of thinkin' I'm just about all right. It's kind of nice to have someone feel that way about you."

"You seem to return the compliment. I don't blame you. It isn't every man who finds himself guardian to an exquisite bit of animated Sevres china. I'm lying back to watch for the time when some scared youth comes to ask your leave to marry her."

"What's that?" snarled Conover, stopping and glowering up at the tall, clean-cut figure at his side.

"Don't get excited," laughed Caine. "You can't expect as lovely and lovable a girl as Desirée Shevlin to live and die an old maid. If you're so opposed to this imaginary suitor I've conjured up, why not marry her yourself?"

"Marry? That kid? *Me?*" sputtered Conover, "Why I'm past thirty an'—an' she ain't twenty yet. Besides I'm a daddy to her. If I hear of you or anyone else queerin' that kid's fondness for me by any such fool talk, I'll—"

"Her father was wise in appointing you her guardian," mocked Caine. "In the absence of man-eating blood-hounds or a regiment of cavalry, you're an ideal Dragon. I remember old Shevlin. A first rate contractor and ward politician; but the last sort of man to have such a daughter. As for Billy, now—he's the model of his father. A tougher little chap and a greater contrast to his sister could hardly be imagined."

"She takes after her mother," explained Conover, puffing mightily at a recalcitrant cigar; "Mother was French. Came of good people, I hear. Named her girl Desirée. French name. Kind of pretty name, too. Died when Billy was born. I

s'pose that's why the boy was named for his dad, instead of being called Pe-air or Juseppy or some other furren trademark. That's why he's tough too. Desirée was brought up. Billy's bringing himself up. Same as I did. It's the best trainin' a boy can have. So I let him go his own gait, an' I pay for the windows he smashes."

"How did Old Man Shevlin happen to leave you guardian of the two children? Hadn't he any relatives?"

"None but the aunt the kids live with. I s'pose he liked me an' thought I'd give the girl a fair show. An' I have. Convent school, music an' furren lingoos an' all that rot. An' she's worth it."

"How about Billy?"

"That's no concern of mine. He gets his clothes an' grub an' goes to public school. It's all any boy's got a right to ask."

"Contractors are like plumbers in being rich past all dreams of avarice, aren't they? One always gets that idea. The Shevlins will probably be as rich as cream—"

"They'll have what they need," vouchsafed Conover.

"Then you're doing all this on the money that Shevlin left?"

"Sure! You don't s'pose I'd waste my own cash on 'em?"

"What a clumsy liar you are!" observed Caine admiringly. "There! There! In this case 'liar' is no more a fighting word than 'paradox.' Don't get red."

"What are you drivin' at?" demanded Conover.

"Only this: The wills and some other documents filed at the Hall of Records, are copied by our men and kept on file in our office. I happened to be going over one of the books

the other day and I ran across a copy of old Shevlin's will. There was a Certificate of Effects with it. He left just \$1,100, or, to be accurate, \$1,098.73."

"Well?" challenged Conover.

"Well," echoed Caine, "The rent of the house where Miss Shevlin lives, her two servants, and her food must come to several times that sum each year. To say nothing of the expenses and the support of the aunt, who lives with her. None of those are on the free list. You're an awfully white chap, Conover. You went up about fifty points in my admiration when I read that will. Now don't look as if I'd caught you stealing sheep. It's no affair of mine. And as she doesn't seem to know, I'm not going to be the cheerful idiot to point out to her the resemblance between her father's \$1,100 and the Widow's Cruse. It's pleasure enough to me, as a student of my fellow animals, to know that a pirate like you can really once in your life give something for nothing. There's the house. Don't forget you're due at the Club in fifty minutes."

Conover, red, confused, angry, mumbled a word of goodbye and ran up the steps of a pretty cottage that stood in its own grounds just off the street they were traversing.

Caine watched the Fighter's bulky form vanish within the doorway. Then he lighted a fresh cigarette and strolled on.

"I wonder," he ruminated, "what his growing list of financial victims would say if they knew that Brute Conover worships as ideally and reverently as a Galahad at the shrine of a little flower-faced nineteen-year old girl? But," he added, in dismissing the quaint theme, "no one of them all would be half so surprised to know it as Conover himself!"

CHAPTER II

THE GIRL

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Conover lounged back and forth in the pretty little reception room of Desirée Shevlin's house, halting now and then to glance with puzzled approval at some item of its furnishings. The room—the whole house—was to him a mystery. Contentedly devoid of taste though he was, the man dimly realized the charm of the place and the dainty perfection of its appointment. That Desirée had accomplished this in no way astonished him. For he believed her quite capable of any minor miracle. But in it all he took a pride that had voiced itself once in the comment:

"I don't see how you could make a room look so nice without a single tidy or even a bow fastened up anywhere. But why did you get those dull old tiles for your mantel? I wouldn't a' kicked at payin' for the best marble."

To-day, Conover gave less than usual homage to the apartment. He was agog to tell its owner his wonderful tidings, and he chafed at her delay in appearing. At last she came—the one person on earth who could have kept Caleb Conover waiting; without paying, by sharp reproof, for the delay.

"I'm sorry I was so long," she began as she brushed the curtains aside and hurried in, "But Billy and I couldn't agree on the joys of tubbing. I'd hate to hate anything as much as he hates his bath. Now you've had some good luck! Glorious, scrumptious good luck! I can tell by the way your mustache is all chewed. You only chew it when you're

excited. And you are only excited when something good has happened. Isn't it clever of me to know that? I ought to write it up: 'Facial Fur as a Bliss Barometer.' How—Oh, I didn't mean to be silly when you're bursting with news. Please be good and tell me. Is it anything about Steeloid?"

"It's *all* about Steeloid," he answered. "I've won out—I've made my pile."

She caught both his hands in hers, with a gesture almost awkward in its happy impulsiveness.

"Oh, I'm *so* glad! So *glad!*" she cried. "Tell me!"

Boyishly, bluntly, eagerly, Conover repeated his story.

His florid face was alight, enthusiasm wellnigh choking him. She heard him out with an excitement almost as great as his own. As he finished she clapped her hands with a little laugh of utter delight.

"Oh, splendid!" she exclaimed. "No one but you would ever have thought of it. It's—" her flush of pleasure yielding momentarily to a look of troubled query—"It's perfectly—*honest*, of course?"

"It's business," he replied.

"That's the same thing, I suppose," she said, much relieved, "And you're rich?"

"A million anyway. And you'll—"

"*Hell!*"

Both turned at the wonder-inspired, sulphurous monosyllable. Desirée jerked the curtain aside, revealing a stocky small boy, very red of face. He was clutching a blue bath robe about him and had no apparent aim in life save to escape from the situation into which his involuntary expletive had betrayed him.

“Now don’t go callin’ me down, Dey,” he pleaded. “I just happened to be going past—I was on the way to take my bath, all right—on the level I was—an’ I heard Mr. Conover say about havin’ a million. An’—an’—I spoke without thinkin’.”

He had been edging toward the stair-foot as he talked. Now, finding the lower step behind him, he fled upward on pattering desperate feet.

“Poor Billy!” laughed Desirée, “He’s an awfully good little chap. But he *will* listen. I can’t break him of it.”

“Maybe I could,” hazarded Conover.

“You’d break his neck and his heart at the same time. Leave him to me. Nothing but kindness does any good where he is concerned.”

“Ever try a bale-stick?” suggested Caleb.

“That will do!” she reproved. “Now, I want to hear more about Steeloid. Poor Mr. Blacarda! It’s pretty hagorous for him, isn’t it?”

“If ‘hagorous’ means he’s got it in the neck, it is.”

“‘Hagorous’” explained Desirée, loftily, “means anything horrid. I know, because I made it up. It’s such a comfort to make up words. Because then, you see, you can give them meanings as you go along. It saves a lot of bother. Did you ever try it?”

“No,” said Conover, apologetically. “I’m afraid I never did. Maybe I could, though, if it’d make a hit with you. But you were talkin’ about Blacarda. You ain’t wastin’ sympathy on *him*, are you?”

“I’m sorry for anyone that gets the worst of it. But—”

“But no sorrier for Blacarda than you would be for anybody else?”

“Of course not. Why?”

“He comes here a lot. Twice I’ve met him here. Is he stuck on you?”

“I think he is.”

“I guess most people are,” sighed Caleb. “I don’t blame him; so long as you don’t care about him. You don’t, do you?” he finished anxiously.

“He’s very handsome,” she observed demurely.

“Is he?”

“Well—pretty handsome.”

“Is he?”

“He’s—I’ve heard girls say so.”

“H’m! Nice crimson lips, red cheeks, oily curled hair and eyes like a couple of ginger snaps!”

“No,” corrected Desirée, judicially, “More like chocolate pies. There’s something very sweet and melting about them. And, besides, you mustn’t run him down. He’s very nice to me. Last night he asked me to marry him. What do you think of *that*? Honestly, he did.”

“The measly he-doll! I wish I’d broke him a year ago instead of waiting for the Steeloid scrap. What’d you say when he asked you?”

“Your face gets such a curious shade of magenta when you are angry, Caleb,” mused Desirée, observing him critically, her head on one side. “But it doesn’t match your hair a little bit. There, I didn’t mean to tease you. Yes, I did mean it, too, but I’m sorry. I told him I couldn’t marry him, of course.”

“Good work!” approved Caleb, “What’d he say then?”

“He—he asked if I’d try and look on him as a brother—‘a dear brother,’ and—”

She broke off with a reminiscent laugh.

“Well, what did you say?”

“I’m afraid I was a little rude. But I didn’t mean to be. I’d heard a smothered giggle from over in the corner. So I told him if I’d really had any use for a brother—a ‘dear brother,’—I could reach right behind the divan and get one. He stalked over to the divan. And sure enough there, behind the cushions, was Billy, all wudged up in a little heap. He—”

“All—*what?*” asked the perplexed Conover, pausing in the midst of a Homeric guffaw.

“‘Wudged.’ All wudged up—like this—” crumpling her ten fingers into a white, compact little bunch. “Mr. Blacarda was very angry. He went away.”

She joined for an instant in Conover’s laughter; then checked herself with a stamp of her foot.

“Stop!” she ordered. “I’m a little beast to behave so. He—cared for me. He asked me to marry him. There ought to be something sacred in all that. And here I am making fun of him. Caleb, *please* say something to make me more ashamed.”

“You’re all right, girl!” chuckled Caleb in huge delight. “Poor pink-an’-white Blacarda! You were—”

“I wasn’t! I ought to be whipped for telling you. But—but somehow, I seem to tell you everything. Honestly, I wouldn’t tell anyone else. Honestly! You *know* that, don’t you?”

“I know you’re the whitest, brightest, jolliest kid that ever happened,” returned Conover, “but you needn’t bother

about Blacarda. I won't tell. Now I've got to get out."

"Aren't you going to take me for a walk or a drive or anything? It's such a gorgeous day, and it's so early. Almost as early as it ever gets to be."

"I can't, worse luck!" said he. "I've got a measly appointment at the Arareek. An' besides—say, little girl, I don't know about walking or driving with you any more."

"Caleb!"

"Listen, till I explain. Now that Mrs. Hawarden's took such a fancy to you an' took you up an' chap'roned you to places where I'd be chased out with a broom—an' all that—well, you get invited to big folks' houses. That's how you met Blacarda, wasn't it? He travels with the gold-shirt crowd. Now, that crowd don't care about me. They will, some day. But they don't, yet. An' if you're seen around with a rank outsider like me—it'll—it may kind of make 'em think you're the same sort / am. An' that'll be liable to queer you with 'em. An—"

"Caleb Conover!"

He stopped, thoroughly uncomfortable, yet vaguely glad of having eased his mind of its worry for her prospects. She was frowning up at him with all the menacing ferocity of an Angora kitten.

"Caleb Conover!" she repeated, in stern rebuke. "Aren't *you* ashamed? Aren't you *ashamed*? Say you are! Now go and stand in the corner. If I ever hear you talk that way about yourself again—why *Caleb*! We're *chums*, you and I. Don't you know that I'd rather have you than all those people put together? Now talk very fast about something

else, or I won't get my temper back again. What's your appointment about?"

"At the Arareek?" he asked, falling in, as ever, with her lightning change of mood. "Oh, nothing much. It's a meeting of the Board of Governors. There's a man in the Club who got in by influence, before they realized just what sort of a punk feller he was. An' now they've called a meeting to see about kickin' him out. There's to be a vote on it. An' he's to appear before 'em to-day to defend himself. Not quite reg'lar in Club by-laws, Caine tells me. But that's what's to be done. They say: 'his business methods bring disrepute on the Club.' That's the sp'cific charge I b'lieve."

"But what have *you* got to do with all that?"

"Nothin'—Except I'm the shrinkin' victim."

"You! Is it—a joke?"

"Not on me. I'll fix it all right. Don't you worry now. I wouldn't a' told you about it if I hadn't known I'd win out."

"You're *sure*?"

"Of course I am. What chance has that bunch of mutton-heads against anyone with man's size brains in his skull? Sure, I'll win. Now, don't look like that, Dey. It breaks me all up to have you blue. I tell you it'll be all right."

"Who are the Governors?"

"Your friend Blacarda is one."

"Oh! That's bad."

"Only counts one vote. And Caine's another. He's on my side. He has more pull with those people than Blacarda."

"I wonder why you and Mr. Caine are such friends. There never were two other men as different."

“He owns the biggest noospaper in Granite, an’ he belongs to one of the top-notch families. So he’s a power in his own way, for all he’s such an odd fish. ‘Eccentric’ they call it, don’t they? Why do we travel together? That lazy don’t-care way of his and his trick of twistin’ sentences upside down an’ then callin’ ‘em ‘epigrams’ is kind of amooosin’. Besides, he’s of use to me. That explains my side of it. I’m of use to him. That explains his. He’ll more’n offset Blacarda.”

“Who are the rest?”

“Hawarden’s one. Husband of your chap’rone friend.”

“Oh, I wish I’d known! I’d have asked her to—”

“I don’t think it’s nec’ssary,” evaded Caleb. “He’ll be all right, I guess.”

“I didn’t know you knew him.”

“No more I do. But I’ve an idea he’ll vote for me.”

“Just the same I wish I’d asked Mrs. Hawarden to make him do it. She’s been so nice to me, I’m sure she’d have done me one more favor.”

“Nice to you, is she? Reelly nice?”

“She’s a dear. Just think of a woman in her position hunting me out and making friends with me and asking me all the time to her house and introducing me to people who wouldn’t otherwise have even poked me with a silver handled umbrella! Nice? I should think she was.”

“Yes,” drawled Conover, solemnly, “I guess she must be. Old Reuben Standish is one of the Governors, too. Know him? President of the Aaron Burr Bank. Big society bug, tradin’ on fam’ly that’s dead an’ fortune that’s dribbled

through his fingers. Sort of man that's so stiff he never unbends till he's broke."

"I think I've met him," reflected Desirée. "Doesn't he look just a little like a rail? Gray and long and mossy—with a sort of home-made face? And one eye that toes in just a little?"

"That's the man," grinned Caleb in high approval. "There's two kinds of financiers: the thick-necked, red-faced kind, with chests that have slipped down;—an' the cold gray kind. Gray hair, gray eyes, gray skin, gray clothes an' gray mustache. Gray souls, too. That sort never take on weight. An' there's just enough humanness in their faces to put you in mind of the North Pole. Thank the Lord, I'm one of the thick, red breed!"

"Do you mean all over or just your head?" queried Desirée innocently, as she glanced at his stiff, carrotty hair. "Oh, it's awfully nice of you to laugh at my poor little jokes. I wonder what you'd do if you ever met a really clever woman?"

"I s'pose I'd begin figurin' out how stupid she'd frame up alongside of you," he answered simply. "You see, I—"

"You were talking about Mr. Standish. Is he going to vote for you?"

"As I lent his bank \$96,000 last year when it was shaky from a run, I guess he is. Not that he's over-grateful. But his bank's in a bad way again and he's li'ble to need me."

"So you are going to discount his future gratitude?"

"Just so. He needs me. An'—I need him. Not only for to-day, but for a plan I've been thinkin' over."

"I wish I could help you with him. I've met his daughter, Letty, once or twice. They say she's engaged to Mr. Caine.

Mrs. Hawarden tells me they've been in love with each other ever since she stopped playing with dolls. I should have hated to give up dolls just in exchange for Mr. Caine. Are there any more Governors?"

"A few. None that you know. I must be off. Now, remember, you aren't to worry. It's all right. I wouldn't bother to keep in the Club if it was like most places of that kind. But it isn't. The Arareek's an institootion in Granite. If you ain't in it, you're nobody. An' at Ladies' Days an' times like that, the Big people always show up. It's a good thing to belong. Besides, a feller gets lots of new experience by joinin' a country club. F'r instance, I never knew what reel lonesomeness was till I went to a few of their Ladies' Days an' Field Days. I might as well a' been on a desert island."

"You poor boy! It's a burning shame! Why do you—?"

"Oh, it ain't always goin' to be like that. Don't be sorry about it. I'll whip 'em into shape before I'm done."

The soaring, clear song of a canary broke in on his boast. Beginning with a faint, barely audible trill, it rose in a glorious piercing crescendo of melody; hung, vibrated, scaled a whole octave, then ceased as abruptly as it had begun.

Caleb turned toward the window between whose curtains swung a cage. The occupant, a ball of golden fluff, barred with gray-green, hopped self-importantly from perch to perch, nervously delighted with the man's scrutiny.

"Hello!" said Conover. "When'd you get that? I never saw him before."

"He came yesterday," explained Desirée. "Isn't he a little darling? Jack Hawarden sent him to me."

“That kid? You don’t mean to say *he’s* stuck on you, too? Why he’s barely twenty-one an’ he can’t earn his own livin’.”

“It’s a real pleasure, Caleb, to hear your fulsome praise of the men I happen to know. First Mr. Blacarda, and now—”

“That’s what’s called ‘sarcasm,’ ain’t it?” asked Conover. “I didn’t mean to rile you. I guess young Hawarden’s all right,—as far’s college let him learn to be. What’s the bird’s name? Or don’t birds have names?”

“Why? Had you thought of one for him? How would ‘Steeloid’ do?”

Caleb’s grin of genuine delight at the suggestion made her add quickly with more tact than truth:

“I wish I’d thought of that before. How silly of me not to! For, you see he’s already named now.”

“Oh, he is, hey?” said the discomfited Conover. “Who named him? Hawarden?”

“No. Billy and I. His name’s Siegfried-Mickey.”

“What a crazy name for a—!”

“Yes, isn’t it? That’s why I like it so. Billy wanted to call him ‘Mickey’ after the bulldog he used to have. And I wanted to call him Siegfried. So we compromised on Siegfried-Mickey. He’s a dear. He knows his name already. Don’t you, Siegfried Mickey?”

The bird, thus adjured, maintained a severely non-committal dumbness.

“See!” triumphed Desirée, “Silence gives assent. He’s a heavenly little singer. Why, only this morning, he sang nearly all the first bar of ‘*The Death of Ase*’.”

“The which?”

“‘*The Death of Ase*.’ In the Peer Gynt suite, you know.”

“Oh, yes! Of course. Sure!” mumbled Caleb hastily. “I was thinkin’ of some other feller’s suite. An’ he sang *that*, did he? The clever little cuss!”

“Wasn’t he, though? And he’d only heard me play it once.”

“Pretty hard thing to sing, too!” supplemented Caleb, wisely.

“Caleb Conover,” she rebuked in cold admonition, “Look at me! No, in the eyes! *There!* Now, how often have I told you not to make believe? You treat me just as if I was a child. *Why* do you pretend to know about ‘*The Death of Ase,*’ you dear old simple humbug? Don’t you know I *always* find you out when you—?”

“I didn’t want you to think I wasn’t up on the things that int’rest you, girl,” he pleaded. “It’s rotten to feel you’ve got to talk down to me every time you speak about music or litterchoor or those things. An’—Lord! but I do hate to let on when I don’t understand things.”

“You understand more of the *real* things—the things that are worth while—than any other man alive,” she protested. “Now say goodbye and run on, or you’ll be late. Don’t forget to stop on the way back and let me know whether the lions eat Daniel or if Daniel—”

“Eats the lions? I don’t know who Dan’l was, but this ain’t goin’ to be that kind of a show. It’ll just be a sheep-killin’ contest. An’ *I* never was built to play the alloorin’ role of Sheep. So you can figger out who’ll be killer an’ who’ll get the job of *killee.*”

CHAPTER III

CALEB CONOVER FIGHTS

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Granite's social life revolved about the Arareek Country Club. Granite felt a guilty pride when its more sensational preachers railed against the local preference for spending Sunday morning on the Arareek links or on the big clubhouse veranda, rather than in church pews. Granite social lights flared dazzlingly at the Club's dances. Granite men chose the Arareek smoking room as a lounging place in preference to the more exclusive Pompton Club's apartments. Situated a half mile beyond the growing city's borders, the Arareek clubhouse lay in the centre of a narrow valley, whence its grounds radiated in all directions.

Thither, Conover, after his talk with Desirée Shevlin, bent his steps. Caleb had been no less amazed than delighted when Caine, a year or so earlier, had succeeded in engineering his election to the Arareek. The Club had been in need of money and was therefore the less inquisitorial as to the character of candidates. Conover was then unknown to most of its members. With a half score of innocuous nobodies he had been admitted. The combined initiation fees had lifted the Arareek momentarily from its financial trouble.

Now, with much the excitement of a shoal of minnows to whose pool a pickerel has found ingress, the club's Governors were seeking to correct their error of negligence. A committee had been appointed to take semi-formal testimony in the case, to overrule whatsoever defense

Conover might seek to make and to report to the Board in favor of the unwelcome member's rejection. The exact mode of transaction was out of rule, from a standpoint of rigid club standards. But the Arareek, as its members boasted, was less an actual club than a phase of local society, and as such was a law unto itself.

On the veranda, as Caleb arrived, several members were seated, watching a putting match on the "green" that stretched betwixt porch and tennis courts. One or two women were among the onlookers. From the awkward hush that fell on the group as he ascended the steps, Conover deduced the trend of the talk his presence had checked. He glanced in grim amusement from one averted or expressionless face to another; then, singling out Caine with a nod, passed in through the low, broad doorway. Caine tossed away his cigarette, smiled non-committally in reply to a bevy of questioning looks, and followed his protégée into the building.

"They're waiting for you," said he, catching up with Conover. "The Committee went to its room five minutes ago, pacing in single file like the Court of Priests in *Aida*. Can't you manage to tremble a little? It seems hard that so much really excellent pomposity should be wasted on a man who doesn't care. Why are you late?"

"I'm always late to an appointment," answered Conover. "Make the other fellow do the waitin'. Don't do it yourself. Lots of time saved that way."

Caine threw open a door and ushered Caleb into a room where a dozen or more men were seated about a long table. Bowing carelessly to the members in general, Caine took a

seat at the table, and motioned Conover toward a chair that had been placed for the purpose at the lower end of the apartment. Conover, disregarding the gesture, slouched across to a larger, more comfortable leather chair, pulled it to the window, flung himself into the seat, his back to the strong afternoon light, and drew out a cigar.

“Now then, gentlemen,” he ordered curtly, as he struck a match on his sole. “Be as brief as you can. My time’s worth money. What do you want of me?”

A murmur—almost a stifled gasp—went around the table, at the contempt in his action and words. There was an embarrassed pause. Then, Reuben Standish, as Chairman of the Committee, rose, gray and portentous, and turned toward Caleb.

“Mr. Conover,” he began, “Certain statements,—charges, in fact,—have been made to the Committee, relative to yourself. It is your right to hear them in detail. I will now read—”

“Never mind that!” commanded Conover. “Just give the gist of the thing. Cut out the details.”

Standish glared reprovably at the wholly unimpressed man at the window. But as the latter purposely sat with his back to the light, his expression was quite illegible.

“Just as you wish,” resumed the Chairman after a moment’s hesitation. “The papers I was about to read are to the effect that you are declared to be in no sense a desirable member of the Arareek Club, either from a personal or a business standpoint. Believe me, I regret the necessity of—”