"I ASSURE you, Sir John, it's exactly what we want."

Mr. Dicker, chief Unionist agent for the constituency, rubbed his hands together, and contemplated the prospective Unionist candidate seated in a chair opposite.

"Exactly what we want," he repeated. "Mark you, Sir John"—he lifted his hand as if to forestall any objections that might be raised—"it will have to be done with care from every point of view. Nothing could be more repugnant to a man in your position than the slightest suspicion that you were in any way boasting."

Sir John Perton nodded decisively.

"And that is precisely what we shall avoid," went on the other calmly. "Again, we must avoid giving the other side any chance of saying that we are merely drawing a red herring across the electors' track. Of course that is precisely what we are doing, but that's a detail. It will therefore have to come not in any sense as an interview with you, but in a brief account of your career and life. And young Titmarsh in the *Mercury* here is the very man to do it. He

writes an 'At Random' column every week as well as his other work, and it's there we'll have the episode of cutting that pack of cards emphasised. It will appear as a detail in the account of your life; it can be magnified when it's taken out and put in the column. It's gorgeous, Sir John—gorgeous. And I wouldn't be surprised if we didn't get you in on it. Besides, it will give us all something to talk about when we go round canvassing. The man who drew the four of spades . . . Gambling with death. . . . I'll get Titmarsh now—this instant——"

He clapped on a hat and dashed to the door: in all his movements Mr. Dicker strongly resembled a terrier after a rat.

"Just think out the story, Sir John; plenty of human interest. All that bit about the water and the pitiless sun and the natives crawling around. And then your gamble with Mr. What's his name on the top of the hill. Gorgeous——"

He darted from the room, and Sir John Perton rose from his chair and crossed to the window. It looked down on the main street of Burchester, and with his hands in his pockets the prospective candidate watched the sleepy midday activity below.

But it is doubtful if he saw anything; if the big brewer's van unloading barrels opposite made any impression on his brain. For he

was back in West Africa on that cursed little show—the show that Mr. Dicker described as gorgeous. He could feel that scorching heat again: he could hear that terrible scream which one of the men gave as he went mad and blew out his brains: he could see—God! would he ever cease to see the blazing hideous scorn in Bill Meyrick's face. With a sudden shiver he passed his hand over his forehead and found it wet.

He swore angrily under his breath: this would never do. The thing was over and done with: buried beneath two years of time. Much water had flowed under the bridge in that two years: his uncle and his first cousin had both been killed in a motor accident and he had come into a baronetcy which he'd never expected. From being a comparatively impecunious officer in a line regiment he had become owner of River Park with an income up in the fifty thousands. And so he'd chucked the service, and now he was taking to politics.

He was young—still on the right side of thirty-five: ambitious, good-looking. And the path of life is smooth for a good-looking unmarried baronet with fifty thousand a year. People prophesy smooth things in such cases, and, strange to say, are generally justified in so doing. Certainly the path that stretched ahead of John Perton seemed very much the primrose

one. If only he could forget, if only. . . His fists clenched in his pockets: he would forget. He had forgotten till that fool Dicker had unearthed the story from Bimbo Charteris, second-in-command of his old regiment, and now staying with him at River Park. He had forgotten: except just sometimes when Bill Meyrick's face came to him out of the darkness. . . . At night, when he couldn't sleep, he'd see it and curse it foolishly. . . .

And yet he was perfectly safe. Nothing could ever happen; the cupboard of this particular skeleton was his brain. Bill Meyrick was dead: of that there could be no doubt. Even Monica was beginning to accept it now. . . . And that reminded him—he was lunching with Monica at the hotel that day. . . .

He glanced at his watch as he heard footsteps on the stairs outside. Twelve o'clock: he'd give this reporter fellow half an hour, and then—Monica. She liked him, he knew: wasn't he Bill Meyrick's best friend? And she'd been engaged to Bill. . . . But Bill had died two years ago. . . .

"This is Mr. Titmarsh, Sir John," announced Dicker.

"Pleased to meet you, Sir John," said the reporter, taking the proffered hand. "From the little Mr. Dicker has told me, it seems to me we've got the goods. And if we've got the goods you can rely upon yours truly to put 'em across."

"I have explained to Mr. Titmarsh, Sir John," said Mr. Dicker a little hastily, "that it will have to be done in the most tactful way. There is nothing a soldier dislikes more than appearing to buck about what he's done."

"A proof of the article shall be sent to you, Sir John, before it's inserted in the paper," announced Titmarsh. "And if there's a word in it that offends you—strike it out."

"I am sure that won't be necessary, Mr. Titmarsh," remarked Sir John quietly. "But really, you know, there is very little to tell. The thing was quite a trifling little affair."

"It's good enough for us, Sir John," said Dicker firmly. "Now if you just run over the story, Titmarsh will make notes."

With a slight shrug of his shoulders, Sir John Perton sat down. Then a little deliberately he lit a cigarette. After all—why not? If he didn't, Charteris would. Tell the story, and tell it well: he was quite a good raconteur if he chose to exert himself.

"We were on detachment," he began, "half a company of the Royal Loamshires. There were three officers and ninety men—holding a strong point. We took up our position at midday on a Tuesday, with the understanding that we should be relieved the following day. There was no sign of any natives when we got there—everything seemed perfectly peaceful. And yet by Tuesday evening

we were completely surrounded. The way the natives had used the scrub as cover was simply amazing. We never saw a sign of them until we realised they were all around us. Even then we didn't see them—except an isolated one here and there. We only knew by the firing.

"You must realise that we were on a little conical hill: the sort of position that is a death trap if there is any artillery about, but we knew the natives had none. Away to the east was a range of low foot-hills, and we knew relief would come from that direction next day. And until it came all we had to do was to hang on, which we didn't anticipate would prove difficult. Without artillery the natives had but little chance of dislodging us.

"We assumed they would try and rush us that night and they did. But we'd withdrawn all the outlying pickets and formed a sort of Cæsar's camp at the top of the hill and we beat them off easily."

Sir John was beginning to enjoy himself: the attention of his audience flattered him.

"Wednesday came and Wednesday went with its pitiless tropical sun, and still no sign of relief. Except for a little desultory sniping the natives didn't trouble us, but they were still there. And they remained there all Wednesday night though they didn't try to attack us again. But we were beginning to look at

one another, we three officers, and wonder. There had been a good deal of ammunition expended on Tuesday night, and if something had delayed the regiment seriously—what was going to happen. . . . It was pretty obvious that the natives thought they'd got us, and they weren't going to be such fools as to lose their lives attacking us, when all they had to do was to sit tight and starve us out.

"You see that was the trouble. Food and worse still—far worse—water. Thursday night—no relief, and the situation was critical. We'd heard sounds of intermittent firing from beyond the hills, but that was all. Came Friday, and the water question had become sheer hell. We had one petrol tin left with an armed guard over it. . . .

"The Commanding Officer had taken one in the arm, and we were up against it good and proper. We had about ten rounds a man left when the ammunition was equalised out, and by Saturday morning, it was reduced to five. They very nearly got us that night. . . ."

Sir John paused for a while; undoubtedly he was telling the yarn well.

"It was about midday on Saturday that Captain Seymour who was in command came to a decision. He called Mr. Meyrick—the other officer—and me, to him in a little sandy bit at the top of the hill which we'd turned into company head-quarters, and he put things to

us straight. Not that it was necessary: we knew already.

" 'We may be able to hold out for one more night,' he said, 'but after that it's impossible. There will be no ammunition left—and no water. If the regiment comes to-day—well and good: if it doesn't come to-morrow it's the end. Something must have delayed them, of course, but it's possible that they don't know the desperate position we're in. I therefore propose that one of you two should undertake the forlorn hope of getting through to the regiment. They must be over there beyond the hills.'

" I remember he wouldn't look at either of us.

" 'It's the most damnable thing I've ever had to do in my life' he went on. 'Being in command here, I cannot go myself, and I take it hard that I have to suggest to one of you two what is practically certain death. Oh! God! Listen to that.'

" It was one of the signallers who'd gone mad and was screaming for water. He blew out his brains ten minutes later.

" 'Practically certain death,' he went on. 'But I cannot disregard the fact that there is a thousand to one chance on whoever goes getting through. And it is my bounden duty not to neglect that chance. I also cannot disregard the fact that it's certain death for all of us to-morrow night if the regiment doesn't

come. Therefore I must ask you to decide between yourselves which of you shall make the attempt.'

"He left it at that, and Mr. Meyrick and I drew lots. We left it till a bit later, and then we cut. It was ace high—high goes, and he drew the ten of diamonds. I drew the four of spades."

He paused for a moment and stared out of the window.

"And that's about all,"

"But did Mr. Meyrick get through, Sir John?" cried Titmarsh excitedly.

Sir John Perton shook his head a little sadly.

"That's the devil of it. He was my best friend, and it's two years since it happened. He's never been heard of since. And the cruel part is that had he waited all would have been well. Just as the sun was going down and the final rays were on the foot-hills we'd been watching so eagerly, I saw the flash of a heliograph. It was our relief. . . ."

He got up and crossed to the window.

"They came next morning, and there were twenty of us left. Captain Seymour had been killed by a chance bullet in the night, and they'd seen no sign of Mr. Meyrick."

He swung round a little deliberately.

"You will understand, gentlemen, that in many ways it is a very personal story. And I therefore must beg of you to treat it as such.

I don't want there to be any hint, for instance, that I am the source of your information. There are, of course, many people in the regiment who know the story, and from whom you might have heard it. I would be obliged if you would let it be implied that that is how you got it."

"But of course," cried Mr. Dicker. "My dear Sir John, it would lose half its value if anyone had an inkling that you were our informant."

"Of course," echoed Titmarsh. "Leave it entirely to me, Sir John."

"I will," said the prospective candidate, with a pleasant smile. "And now, if you will excuse me, I have a small luncheon party. Good day. Back at three, Dicker."

"Gorgeous," said Titmarsh as the door closed. "You were right, Mr. Dicker. Blazing sun : thirst : ammunition running out : the man who cut the four of spades. It's a cinch, old man. Let's go and have a spot."

The two men strolled along the street and turned into the County Hotel.

"A cinch, my boy : a dead snip, Dicker—what's that line I read somewhere. . . Thanks, Miss ; a little more soda in mine. . . . By some poet . . . Kipling—no not Kipling. . . . I'll get it in a moment . . . Wait : have got. . . .

" 'Scornful men who have diced with death under the naked skies.' "

A man with a big black beard who was standing close by turned round and stared at him.

"I'll put that in next week in the column," went on Titmarsh. "And then everybody will associate the two. The man who drew the four of spades: the man who diced with death. . . . It's worth a thousand votes." He broke off suddenly and stared through the door. "Hullo! Hullo! Hullo! behold the small luncheon party! Isn't that Miss Stratton he's with."

Mr. Dicker nodded.

"She's helping him. And I think, my boy," he added knowingly, "I think. . . . But not a word about that. . . . Well, I must be getting on."

"I'll have a proof ready by the evening," said Titmarsh, finishing his drink.

The glass doors swung to behind them, leaving the black-bearded man alone in the bar.

"And who may those two be?" he asked the barmaid.

"The little perky one is Mr. Titmarsh who is on the *Mercury* staff," she said. "And the other is Mr. Dicker who is acting as agent for Sir John for the coming election. Sir John Perton, you know: such a nice gentleman. Always a kind word and a pleasant smile for everyone."

The black-bearded man planked some money on the counter and strode towards the door.

"Which is more than some people 'ave," she fired at his retreating back. "A beaver," she continued darkly to space as she watched him go out into the street. "And a nasty black one. What's that? Two special Martinis for Sir John? We've only got one sort in here."

She turned to the waiter who had entered the bar.

"Did you see that black beaver? A perfect 'orror. Is Sir John lunching with Miss Stratton?"

"'E is," said the waiter.

"Has she got a ring on, yet?"

"Gaw lumme!" said the waiter, "there's about ten tables in there complaining about the beef. 'Ow would I know? Give me them cocktails."

"You ain't sat on a wasp, 'ave you? There they are, and don't splash 'em over with your shaking 'and."

"Shaking foot," retorted the waiter. "With the amount you put in a glass, it wouldn't splash over in a ruddy earthquake."

He hurried away with the drinks on a tray.

"Your special ones, Sir John," he announced as he placed them on the table.

"Thank you, Charles. And we'll have lunch in five minutes."

He watched the waiter hurry away, only to stop and speak to some people by the door. He saw the people glancing at him covertly and whispering. And a faint smile of satisfaction hovered for a moment round his lips. It was good to be Sir John Perton, fourteenth baronet, prospective member of Parliament: it was good to be having lunch with Monica Stratton. And he would not have been having lunch, nor would he have been fourteenth baronet, if . . . Confound old Bimbo Charteris bringing up that yarn again. Still it might help him. . . . Clever chap, Dicker. . . . But Monica must never know it was he who had told it. . . . It would undoubtedly look a bit vulgar. Besides, Bill Meyrick: even now he wasn't quite certain how she still felt about Bill. On that subject she always dried up.

"I say, Monica," he said as they sat down to lunch, "there's a thing I rather want to talk to you about. Dicker has unearthed that old chestnut, when we were on detachment."

"You mean when you and Bill cut——" said the girl.

He nodded.

"He's got all the details—I think a chance remark of Bimbo's first put him on the track: and a confounded little newspaper man called Titmarsh has been buzzing round me like a fly all the morning. Well, the long and the

short of it is that I'm very much afraid that it will all come out in this local rag the *Mercury*. And I thought I'd tell you at once because—" he hesitated for a moment or two—" because I wouldn't like you to think that I had anything to do with it. At first I flatly refused to allow it, but Dicker pointed out how futile it was. The *Mercury* people are backing me for all they're worth, and it's what I gather they call a stunt. They mean to print it whatever I say. So what I've done is to stipulate that I shall see a proof before it's printed, And I'd like you to see one, too. I'd just hate—dash it all, Monica, you know what I mean—to make capital out of dear old Bill's death."

The girl smiled a little sadly.

" I know that, John. But Bill, if he knew, wouldn't mind. And if it helps you to get in, he'd just laugh as he always used to."

Sir John heaved an inward sigh of relief: how very wise he'd been to tell her. Then he looked her straight in the face.

" After I'm in, Monica—or not, as the case may be—I'm going to ask you a certain question once again."

She met his glance gravely.

" I won't promise a satisfactory answer," she said.

" Dear, is there any good hoping any longer?" he cried. " It's two years now: we'd at any rate have heard from the old chap by this time."

" I know that," she answered. " And you've been wonderfully patient, John. Only . . . I don't know. I just don't know. Don't let's talk about it now, anyway. The important thing to be done is to get you in. And if that story does help, Bill will be so pleased."

And it did help. Titmarsh worked it with a skill which earned him the whole-hearted admiration of Mr. Dicker. Of what use to issue an official statement in an interview that it was nothing? Just ordinary duty, a thing which had no bearing on the election : a thing which the Liberal candidate would have done himself.

Of course Sir John would say that : it was his natural modesty. And the electors could visualise him, clean-cut, good-looking, scornfully " dicing with death under the naked skies." But by no stretch of imagination could they see his opponent, Mr. Timkins, a retired grocer, doing anything of the sort.

" Dicing with death." Titmarsh hugged himself over the flash of genius that had recalled that line. He'd had it in for the first time in the previous day's issue, and from information received it had gone right home. It had made the citizens of Burchester sit up and take notice. " Dicing with death." That's the sort of member to have.

And the county regiment, too : great thing altogether. Fine man, Sir John : fine regiment : fine fellow, Titmarsh. . . .

He looked up as the door opened and the office boy appeared.

"A man to see you, Mr. Titmarsh. Won't give no name."

Titmarsh removed his feet from the desk as a strange came in. He was a black-bearded man, and the sub-editor felt vaguely conscious of having seen him somewhere before.

"Good morning," said the stranger quietly. "I was reading the *Mercury* this morning, and I was much interested in your article on Sir John Perton. I think I saw you two or three days ago in the County Hotel."

Titmarsh nodded: he had recalled him now.

"May I ask you one point?" continued the stranger. "You state that on the evening of the Saturday a heliograph was seen from the neighbouring hills—the long-looked-for message, as you so graphically put it, which announced relief. Is that statement correct?"

"Of course it's correct" said Titmarsh stiffly. "Otherwise it wouldn't be there."

"I see," murmured the black-bearded man. "And since I assume you were not there yourself, may I ask how you discovered that interesting detail?"

"From Sir John himself," said Titmarsh truculently. "He personally supplied me with one or two trifling points of that sort. Anyway, what the deuce has it got to do with you?"

The black-bearded man smiled.

"What, indeed? Good morning."

He rose from his chair, and there was a strange look in his eyes.

"Sir John himself! Well, well, Mr. Titmarsh, that is at any rate first-hand information, isn't it? Have you any use in your paper for outside contributions? Of course—nothing of mine would be up to the standard of dicing with death and naked skies. Still, I may send something along for your consideration in due course. And I can promise you it will at any rate have the virtue of being topical—and true."

With a slight nod he left the office, leaving Titmarsh staring after him. What the devil was the fellow getting at? Was he out for trouble, or what? He reached out for the telephone: should he ring up Dicker? And yet—what was the use? What could the man do? Heliograph: that was the signalling affair on which the sun flashed. And Sir John had distinctly said that just before the sun went down he'd seen it. The final rays on the foothills: his very words. No use ringing up: he'd just mention it next time he saw Dicker.

And so no telephone bell rang, and Sir John Perton sat down to lunch half an hour later in ignorance of the fact that a black-bearded man who had been interested in heliographs was even then approaching River Park.

It was a small luncheon—just the house-party consisting of Bimbo Charteris, Lady

Stratton and Monica. And conversation centred round the coming election.

"I wish to heaven he'd never got hold of the yarn," said Sir John. "'Scornful men . . .' Think of it, my dear people. The little blighter never told me he was going to put that in."

"Doesn't matter, John," barked Lady Stratton. "Anything to keep that fearful grocer out. He's just one of the new bunch of war profiteers. Out of the bottom drawer the whole lot. Got no use for 'em. They eat peas with a knife and talk about serviettes."

"For heaven's sake don't start mother off on that topic," laughed Monica, "or she'll never finish her lunch."

"Lady Stratton's quite right, old man," said Bimbo. "You're the type of fellow we want in Parliament to-day."

"And after all, John," put in Monica, "it was a fine show. I know you like to pretend it was nothing: Bill would do the same if the cards had gone the other way. But the fact remains that you two did dice with death, and though it may sound a bit melodramatic in cold blood at lunch or in a newspaper, it was a fine show. It catches the imagination."

"It does that all right," laughed Sir John. "If only they hadn't called me a scornful man. What is it, Jackson?"

He turned to the butler, who was standing beside him with a note on a salver.

" A gentleman has just brought this, Sir John. He would like to see you, but he wished you to have this note first."

" Will you excuse me ? " Sir John took the envelope and slit it open. " Truly the worries of a prospective candidate never cease."

" Until you're in," said Lady Stratton. " Then you can sleep for years."

She paused suddenly and stared at her host. " What on earth is the matter with you, John ? You look as if you were going to faint."

And assuredly Sir John Perton's face was ghastly. Every vestige of colour had left it, and he swallowed once or twice as if he were choking. The opened envelope had fluttered to the floor at his feet, and in his shaking hand he held the enclosure. It was an ordinary playing card, and Bimbo Charteris, who had involuntarily risen to his feet, glanced at it.

It was the king of hearts.

" What is it, John ? " cried Monica anxiously.

" Nothing," stammered her host. " Nothing. Only, I must see this man. Will you excuse me, please ? "

He pushed back his chair, and rose a little unsteadily.

" Outside the front door, you say ? "

And then he staggered back and leaned against the table. A black-bearded man was standing in the doorway. For perhaps the

space of five seconds there was silence, and then the girl gave a little cry.

"Why, it's Bill!"

"Great Scott!" said Bimbo dazedly. "So it is!"

And once again silence settled on the room. For the man at the door said nothing: he merely stared at Sir John Perton.

"You don't seem very glad to see me, John," he said at length.

"It's a bit unexpected," stammered the other. "I thought you were dead."

"We all did, Bill, dear," said the girl, going up to him and laying her hand on his arm.

For a moment his eyes softened as he looked at her; then, with a little movement, he forced himself from her hand.

"For heaven's sake don't all stand about by the door in the middle of lunch," cried Lady Stratton. "Come and sit down, all of you. John, tell that man of yours to give me some more food, and then send him out of the room."

With shrewd old eyes that missed nothing, Lady Stratton watched her hoped-for son-in-law struggling to regain his self-control. His agitation had not been a pretty thing to see; in fact, it had been out of all proportion to what might have been expected owing to the complications that would now inevitably arise over Monica.

"What's happened?" she said in a hoarse whisper to Bimbo Charteris.

"I wish to God I knew, Lady Stratton," he answered, and his eyes were troubled.

"So you thought I was dead," said Bill Meyrick, taking the chair that Jackson had placed for him before leaving the room. "Well, as you see, I'm not. They didn't kill me: they only tortured me."

"Bill—my dear!" The girl gave a little cry.

"They tortured me day in, day out, for eighteen long months. Would you have liked to be tortured for eighteen months, John?"

Sir John Perton stared at him with haggard eyes and did not speak.

"Answer me, damn you!" snarled Meyrick.

"Steady on, Bill," said Charteris quietly. "Remember there are ladies here."

"I apologise," answered the other. "But two years of hell is apt to make one forget social amenities."

"Confound your social amenities, Bill," cried Charteris. "What's on your chest? What's all this mysterious business mean? What the dickens is this king of hearts doing?"

He bent over and picked up the card.

"You want to know the reason of the king of hearts? Why not ask John? You saw the effect it had on him."

But Sir John Perton sat motionless, with his face buried in his hands.

"There is one thing which two years' hell does for a man, Charteris. It may not be good or pretty, but it breeds a desire for revenge on the person responsible."

The girl caught her breath sharply.

"You speak strange words, Bill Meyrick," said Lady Stratton gravely. "Don't beat about the bush any more. We know what happened. You cut for it—you two—and you lost. What more is there to be said?"

"You drew the ten of diamonds, Bill," said Charteris. "And John drew the four of spades."

"Did you draw the four of spades, John?" said Meyrick quietly.

And suddenly they understood.

"Oh, my God!" said the girl, and Charteris's face was grey.

"We borrowed Private Atkinson's pack of cards, you may remember, John," went on Meyrick. "And I cut first. It was ace high —high goes. I drew the ten of diamonds. We joked about it; that put the chances definitely in your favour. And even as we joked your hands were trembling and your mouth was dry. You'd discussed your feelings pretty freely with me that afternoon—your rage and annoyance at being scuppered on a little side-show of that description. You had a title to come and much money. It all seemed so utterly not worth while. Why the devil hadn't

you chucked immediately after the big war? But on this miserable little show—who cared? Who at home even knew about it? I remember you harped on that point; it was always a failing of yours, John—your love of the limelight. You'd harped on it so much that your nerves were like fiddle strings that day—and I knew they were like fiddle strings. So I offered to go without cutting; but you wouldn't have that. Certainly not; appearances must be kept up. And then I cut the ten of diamonds. I saw that wild hope in your face, John, as you saw my card. Surely you wouldn't draw higher than that. For you were afraid, John; sick with fear at the thought of going. So was I."

For a while he paused, but the man at the head of the table gave no sign.

"And then someone in my platoon shouted. It was Adams; he'd been hit, but I thought it might be an attack. So I went to the edge of that little sandy plateau to see. And my back was to you, John, when you drew. What card did you draw, you cur; tell them what card you drew. You won't; what matter? They know. You drew the king of hearts, and you were trying to put it back as I turned round. With your fumbling hand you'd got out the four of spades, and for a moment you tried to bluff it off. But I got you by the wrist, John, and when I taxed you with it

you broke down. Sobbed like a child. . . . I didn't blame you for that ; anybody might have croaked. But to cheat a man who was your friend was not a good thing to do. . . ."

Once again he broke off, and for a long while no one spoke. And then Bimbo Charteris rose.

"Have you anything to say, Perton ? "

"I haven't quite finished, Charteris," said Meyrick. "There is worse to come. What was my last word to you, John ? I will refresh your memory. I said—'There's five minutes more of sunshine, John, and then the darkness will hide your shame.' And during that five minutes something happened, didn't it ? "

The two women looked at him uncomprehendingly, but on Bimbo Charteris's face had come a look of scorn immeasurable. He understood.

"Oh ! you cur," he muttered ; "you damnable cur. You always said he'd been gone for twenty minutes or half an hour."

"But I don't follow, Bill," cried Monica. "What happened ? "

"During that five minutes, Monica, John saw the helio on the hills to the east. And he never called me back. The direction I'd taken prevented me seeing it—and he never called me back though he could easily have done so. I didn't find that out till I read the interesting article in the *Mercury*, John. I have

thought of you these two years merely as a cheat, and not as a would-be murderer also."

And then at long last Sir John Perton rose to his feet. His face was white and his hands trembled, though his voice was steady.

"I'm in your hands, Meyrick. I admit it all. I cheated you, and then I let you go to your death to keep it dark. My only excuse is that I wasn't responsible for my actions, and that is not a man's excuse. What are you going to do?"

Bill Meyrick stared at him thoughtfully.

"'Scornful men who have diced with death,'" he quoted. "Shall I tell 'em the dice were loaded, John? A nice article in the *Mercury*?"

Bimbo Charteris swung round.

"The regiment, Bill. You're still one of us."

"But he's not," snapped Meyrick.

"He was when it happened."

And then Bill Meyrick felt the girl's hand on his arm.

"Bill, dear, there's another thing you still are—engaged to me. Unless you want to break it off."

"Break it off!" he cried. "Why, the worst torture I've had has been the thought that when I did escape I'd find you married."

The hardness had gone out of his eyes as he looked at her.

"I'll do what you say, Monica."

"No, dear. You'll do what you always, in the bottom of your heart, meant to do—the big thing. Why did you go, Bill, after you'd found he'd cheated?"

"Because he wasn't fit to go himself."

"Because you're a bigger man than he is. I've always known it. Why not let it rest at that? He's punished enough already."

She pushed back her chair and rose.

"Let's go, Bill. We've two years to make up."

* * * *

Which is the true story of why Sir John Perton, fourteenth baronet, decided at the last moment not to contest the constituency of Burchester, and went abroad for an indefinite period after letting River Park to his rival Mr. Timkins.