

A SOLDIER AND A GENTLEMAN

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J. MACLAREN COBBAN

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A GENTLEMAN**

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BY
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"The Horned Cat," "King of Andaman," etc.



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CHAPTER I.

AN EVENING OF ADVENTURE.

It was an unusually hot week of the uncertain month of July. The heavens were as brass, and the elements seemed melting with fervent heat. There was not a breath of air to suggest coolness. The leaves of the trees in the parks looked scorched, the grass was parched and brown, and the ornamental waters appeared stagnant and unwholesome. Throughout all London the bricks were baking, and the people sweltering in the direct and reflected sunshine ; but nowhere was the heat more fetid and stifling than about Soho. The atmosphere was charged not only with the exhalations of a poor and densely-packed population, but also with the odours of neglected refuse, vegetable and other, in the courts and the streets.

In the early evening, women with babies and women without, neither very much tied nor very much buttoned, sat on door-steps, or leaned against door-posts with their arms lazily crossed ; while half-clad children played and shouted and perspired in the gutters or ran in and out of the shady courts ; and hulking or evil-looking men, with pipes in their mouths and their hands in their pockets, hung about corners and the swinging doors of public-houses. In Dean Street the only active persons to be seen were two or three costermongers with barrows of fish or fruit, who, with their arms and their throats bare, urged their laggard donkeys as feelingly and yelled as lustily as usual ; and a melting postman in unofficial straw hat who urged his weary rat-tat round.

There was another, a tall, well-built young man, who emerged from one of the houses, a miracle of coolness. He was dressed in a tweed suit and a round hat, and he carried a pair of gloves and a little cane which was much too short to walk with. He was turning down the street with a swinging stride when he observed the postman. He returned to the door from which he had come, and waited till the postman approached. "Anything," he asked, "for George Ferrers ?"

The postman carelessly glanced at the address of two or three of his letters, said "No," and passed on.

George Ferrers jerked out a nod of acknowledgment of his courtesy, tucked his little cane under his arm, set his hat a little more jauntily over his eye, strode away, his step ringing clear on the pavement. He was evidently not in the calmest of tempers. Once or twice he muttered "Damn!" to himself and beat his thigh with his cane. He swung right on his way, elbowing aside without compunction the hulking loafers, who turned with a furious "Wot the b——!" which became a cheerful "All right, gov'nor," when they saw the tall, muscular figure. The children stopped their play to look up at him, and the women glanced at him with approval and seductiveness.

"Fine man, ain't he?"—"Looks like a officer"—"There's a gen'leman for yer!" were some of the least questionable of the comments made on his appearance—comments which his quick ear caught, and which somewhat soothed his temper; for to the average healthy man there is nothing more agreeable than the admiration of womankind. He twirled his fair curling moustache with an air, fastened, in spite of the heat, one button of his coat, the better to

show off the lines of his figure, squared his shoulders and swelled his chest, and marched with something of that bow of the leg which marks the matured Lifeguardsman. Through the squalid swarming streets of Soho and St Giles he thus made his way, and arrived in St Martin's Lane, crossing which he found himself at the corner of Long Acre. There he paused, and debated with himself a moment, slowly twisting the ends of his moustache. He was hungry. Should he content himself with bread-and-cheese and a glass of ale in a tavern? Or, should he deny himself the ale, and have something more staying and nutritious in the *à-la-mode* beef-shop at his elbow? Though he had what he called "a thirst" upon him, he decided for the diet without drink, and turning on his heel, he entered the shop *à-la-mode*.

It is scarcely fair to expose all the bare shifts to which patient merit may be reduced, and how it has often parsimoniously to consider the purchasing power of a penny. Let it suffice to say that George Ferrers made a tolerable meal, to which a piquant relish was imparted by the kind looks of the plump, though somewhat untidy, serving-girl behind the counter. The box in which he sat to consume his viands was inadequate. The seat was narrow, and

his knees touched the bench on the other side of the little table. A little man might have enjoyed in it complete privacy except from the overseeing eye of the counter-girl ; but George Ferrers could conceal no more than his plate and a few buttons of his waistcoat. He sat so high that he could see into all the other boxes, and he felt that his dominant height had a depressing effect on the dirty carters—themselves bulky men—and the nondescript loafers who were feeding in them. He hurried, therefore, through his meal, paid for it—not forgetting to tip the plump serving-girl, who responded with a surprised, “Thank you, sir”—and returned into the street.

He chinked his change in his hand, and dropped it into his pocket with as much of a pang of anxiety as his cheerful spirit would permit him to feel. The few pieces of silver and copper—making one-and-ninepence in all—were the amount of his pecuniary resources, and he had no immediate prospect of more. Yet he must have a smoke. He had had his appetite for food but half allayed ; for it took a good deal to keep his continent of body in condition ; but he knew he would feel satisfied if he had a pipeful of tobacco. Turning down St. Martin’s Lane, therefore, he entered a tobacconist’s and purchased a half-