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FAIR TO SEE

A NOVEL

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BY

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CHAPTER I.

THE shooting season of the year 186—, — the great and glorious “Twelfth,” — was drawing near, and the prospects and the hopes therewith connected were one wet Sunday afternoon the subject of deep discussion in the mess-room of the — th, then quartered in the New Barracks at Gosport. The regiment had very lately returned from a tour of foreign service; and this circumstance entitled the officers to two months’ extra leave of absence, as soon and in such proportions as they could be spared from “duty.” About half of their number, made up of those who did not specially affect sport, and of those whose juniority deprived them of a voice in the matter, were already availing themselves of this privilege; and thus the approaching months of August and September were left open to those who remained behind — gentlemen for whom the crow of the “muir-cock” and the whirr of the partridge were that very soul of music for which they had been yearning all the last four years in a tropical station.

The company, therefore, lounging in the mess-room after church-parade and luncheon on the Sunday in question, being mostly of one persuasion as to sport—with one faith, one hope, and, for the present at least, one idea—formed a harmonious and happy assemblage, and the common idea was very thoroughly ventilated. The special qualities of the old “muzzler,” the various modifications of the “pin” breech-loader and the “central-fire,” the rival merits of Henry, and Dickson, and Purdey & Dougall, were gone into at full length; pointers and setters, retrievers and terriers—dogs of all degrees—had their due share of attention; nor, in the exhaustive treatment of the subject, was a place denied to the minor equipments of the “shikari,” which were all laid on the *tapis*, and sat upon with the solemnity befitting subjects of such grave importance.

Sportsmen—or, as we should perhaps rather say, men talking about sport—are apt to repeat themselves; and undoubtedly this tendency to iteration is one of the deadliest nuisances to which flesh, in club and smoking room, is heir. Who does not tremble when the hunting Munchausen gets into his saddle? when the nautical proser clears out of harbour? when the shooting Bore plants his foot upon his native heath, and opens fire with his monotonous barrels?

But here, all being of the same mind, none were dissatisfied; and though every one who had an idea or an opinion repeated it emphatically not less than seventeen or eighteen times, the hearing vouchsafed to each successive utterance was perfectly patient and respectful. Why not? Here all interests were respected, here perfect reciprocity was established; and under such circumstances, this conversational method has the very tangible advan-

tage of killing a wet afternoon with a minimum tear and wear of cerebral tissue, of which we can never be too saving. By degrees the conversation passed to the plans and prospects of individuals for the next two months.

"What lucky fellows are going north for the 'Twelfth'?" asked one of the party.

"I am," and "I am," and "I am," rose from several voices.

"AND I AM!" cried Fuskisson, a little white ensign, speaking in large capitals with a voice like a Jew's harp.

"And I am NOT!" shouted M'Niven, the adjutant—a large, loud, red, portentous-looking Scot, whose nationality, combined with certain peculiarities of diction, had procured for him the sobriquet of "Ossian."

"But I AM," persisted Fuskisson, as if in that fact M'Niven ought to find ample compensation. "Old Gosset, my father's partner, has again come to the front; and this will be my second innings at Braxy. Luck for me, isn't it? Braxy *is* something like a billet. You can bag your five-and-twenty brace there any day, don't you know? besides hooking your salmon in Kelt water in the morning, don't you see? and then the feeding and the liquor, mind you! Pass that bottle of sherry, some one, that I may drink old Gosset's health."

"Pearls cast unto the swine!" thundered M'Niven. "Pearls cast utterly to a very foul sort of swine, pale-faced descendant of the Fuski! It has now come to this, that huckstering aldermen, — bloated, gouty-hooved, asthmatic, turtle-eating aldermen, — with their puny brood of aldermanikins like you, desecrate the heather, demoralise the game, and suck up all the ozone from Scotia's violated breezes; while I, Niven, sad son of Niven and of the mountain, pine grouseless in this southern cell."

“Are you really going to pine all the leave-season in your southern cell, Ossian?” asked Fuskisson, who took the adjutant’s magniloquent personalities with perfect composure.

“‘My poverty, but not my will, consents.’”

“Neither my poverty nor my will consents,” said Bertrand Cameron, a handsome, smartlooking subaltern; “but, all the same, it seems as if I were doomed to share Ossian’s cell with him. Here am I with the frugal savings of two years, saved for the very purpose of getting some shooting in Scotland when we came home; here am I, author of seven advertisements on the subject, still unprovided with a moor; that is, Pigott and I—for, of course, I could not go in for the whole thing by myself; so as Pigott is in the same boat with me, he will make a third for the cell, if something doesn’t turn up soon.”

“Have you looked in to-day’s ‘Field’?” asked one of the party.

“No, I haven’t. Has it come?”

“Yes; and I heard some of the fellows at breakfast reading and laughing over an advertisement of a Scotch shooting in it.”

“Oh! a ‘Tommiebeg,’ I suppose.”

“I don’t know: you’d better have a look at it.”

“I wonder where it is.”

“Dent took it to his room after breakfast,” said Fuskisson. “I saw him going away with it.”

“Well, as he’s your captain, you’re responsible for him; go and bring it, and tell him he’s fined.”

“I daren’t go near him just now; he’s awfully savage at me. Fancy his cheek! he ordered me to come and load cartridges for him till luncheon; and when I told