

The Champion of the Fleet

AN ADVENTURE OF PETER CREWE—"THE MAN WITH THE CAMERA EYES"

By HAROLD CARTER

Copyright, 1911, by W. G. Chapman, in the United States and Great Britain

In spite of an acquaintance which had lasted several months, I had never known that Peter Crewe was an Englishman. His accent was of that indeterminate character common to the educated class of both America and England, and I had learned very little about his antecedents, since he appeared to be wholly absorbed in his hobby of unraveling mysteries through the medium of his peculiar optical gift. That he had any interests outside this line of occupation was borne in upon me for the first time when going to his office to consult him relative to a client of mine, I found him reading a morning newspaper and giving vent to short and emphatic ejaculations.

"Did you see this?" he exclaimed. "The American fleet's middleweight champion is to box our middleweight champion at Coney Island tomorrow evening at eight."

"Our champion?" I exclaimed. "The champion of the visiting British fleet," Crewe explained; and then I learned his nationality for the first time.

"Are you interested in boxing?" I asked in some surprise.

"I was a pupil of John L. Sullivan," he answered proudly.

It developed that Crewe had been widely known at one time as a successful amateur boxer, and was still held in respect as a man of parts and a stickler for all the best traditions of the ring.

"It is strange that you should have brought up this subject," I said, "because it is about this very man, Thompson, the American middleweight, that I have come to consult you."

"What is the trouble?" asked Crewe, laying his newspaper aside.

"I have an appointment with him at three," I answered. "Suppose you come over to my office and let him tell you his own story."

Crewe agreed, and, promptly at the hour set, Thompson made his appearance. He was a handsome, well-set-up fellow, a seaman from the "North Dakota," and a man of evident intelligence.

"Sit down, Thompson," I said. Thompson complied, laying down his head-covering upon the table. "Now," I said, "tell your story in detail."

"Well, it's this way, Mr. Langton," said Thompson, pulling up his trouser legs. "Next week I shall be twenty-one, and if I live to reach my majority I inherit a snug little sum of fifty thousand dollars from the estate of my uncle in Ireland. If I don't live that long it goes to a distant connection of my uncle known as Philip Egan. It wasn't willed that way exactly, but there was a court case, and the lawyers fixed it that way between them after eating up half the estate in litigation; the sum left was nearly a hundred thousand."

"And you have experienced some remarkable things during the past few days," I continued.

"Yes, sir, as I told you this morning. We came ashore last week after a year's cruise, during which I hardly ever left the ship. Phil Egan was one of the first men I met on landing. He came up to me and shook hands. 'Frank,' he said, 'of course I hoped you wouldn't live long enough to get that money, but we're not going to let a little thing like that stand between friends, are we?' And though I've always mistrusted Phil, what could I do but give him the glad grip? So we saw the sights of the town together."

"Now, sir, that was five days ago, and of course I've been careful of myself, being in training and having every hope of whipping the Britisher at the Island tomorrow. And yet, it has seemed to me that my life wasn't in particularly good standing."

"That same night, while Phil and I were strolling down the Bowery, perfectly sober, we were attacked by a gang without a moment's warning. Phil got away; I knocked down two of them, and the third nearly got home with his knife on me." He pulled down his sailor's collar and displayed a faint red scratch, almost encircling the throat.

"That would have been a bad wound if it had gone an inch deeper, Mr. Langton," he remarked philosophically. "And the day before yesterday, when I was passing down a side street, I heard a snap at my side and a crack at a window opposite. I looked, and in the woodwork of a door behind me I found this, just embedded."

He took from his kerchief a .45 calibre bullet.

"You suspect Egan is trying to murder you for the sake of the money?" I asked.

"Why, yes, sir," answered Thompson, reddening, "but it seems such a trifle, hardly worth mentioning."

"Never mind; out with it."

"Well, the fact is, I got tattooed by a Chinaman," said Thompson. "I'd always wanted to be done, and yet somehow I'd been a little shy; but Egan persuaded me and I had an eagle put on my chest, very artistically, too."

"Let me see it," said Crewe.

Thompson stripped, and a moment later we perceived the outlines of our national bird upon the sailor's chest.

"It's hardly sore at all," said Thompson. "That's the Chin's secret; it don't make you sore like most tattooing."

"And Egan persuaded you to have that done," said Crewe thoughtfully. "Now, have you a photograph of this man Egan?"

"Yes, sir, I brought it with me at Mr. Langton's instructions," said the sailor. "We were took together at Coney—twenty-five cents, and a very creditable piece of work."

Crewe took the photograph in his hand and focussed his eyes upon it.

"Hm! These cheap photographs have one advantage over the expensive ones," he said. "They are truer to life; the photographers don't go in for retouching. Thank you, my friend," he said, returning it. "Now, let me give you one piece of advice. Go back to your ship and stay aboard her and don't leave until you come of age."

"But the fight's tomorrow," said Thompson helplessly.

"Cut it out."

"Why, sir, if I say it myself, I'm the only man in the fleet can whip the Britisher. They've been bragging how they're going to put it all over us."

"If you take part in that fight your chances of inheriting that money will be remote. Cut it out, Thompson, and, whatever you do, wear a pad of soft cotton batting over that tattoo mark."

The sailor rose with an expression of offended dignity.

"If that's all you can advise me, gentlemen," he said, "I must say my visit here hasn't done me much good."

"It has saved you a lot of harm, young man," said Crewe. "At least you have had your warning. You don't intend to obey my suggestions, I suppose?"

"No, sir," answered the sailor doggedly.

"Then that is all I have to say to you. No, Mr. Langton doesn't want to add anything. Good afternoon to you."

And he showed him out of the door.

"I must say, Crewe," I began, "you have a rather unceremonious manner of dismissing my clients."

"Forgive me, Langton," said Crewe, all penitence in a moment, "but really I saw so much further ahead than you. I have reason to believe that a diabolical scheme has been put into execution which will result in the young man's death at the fight. Tell me, did you draw any deductions from the appearance or facts of the tattooing?"

"It looked a little bluer than the average tattoo mark," I said.

"Excellent. Then you are beginning to observe," said Crewe. "But still, even if you could see all, that would help you little without a knowledge of that man Egan."

"You have seen him before?" I asked.

"Several times. In the month of July, 1907, I saw him in the Central Criminal court, during the trial of three Chinese gun-men, when I happened in with a communication for the district attorney. I was at that time practising law. The gun men were acquitted. A month later, while conducting a party of ladies over Chinatown I saw him seated at a table with two of the same men, eating with chopsticks. In fact, Egan is one of that small but influential class of whites that makes itself useful to the Chinese criminal and is parasitical to him."

"Now I see your point," I exclaimed. "The tattooing substance was of a poisonous nature, and—"

"In such a case I should hardly have permitted our friend to depart."

"But you surely do not suggest that the English champion has been bribed to injure him?"

"No," said Crewe, smiling. "Still, at all hazards Thompson must not be allowed to participate in the boxing affray at Coney Island tomorrow. By the way, you do not know Chinese, I suppose?"

"No."

"I often wish I did. With my power of visual retention, I am able to reproduce practically every sign of the ten thousand commonly used in the Chinese written language. But unfortunately my memory is rather subnormal than extraordinary, and I am never able to recollect what any of these signs mean. However, we have a little work to do in Chinatown."

We took the Third Avenue elevated to that swarming region, walked up Mott street, and halted before an obscure, dingy-looking shop, in whose doorway stood a wide-hatted, felt-shod Celestial.

"This," said Crewe, "is the headquarters of the Hip Sings, by which clan the gun men I referred to were

employed. What do you see in the window?"

I saw a miscellaneous assortment of firecrackers, preserves, vegetables, lacquer work, wood carvings, and kimonos.

"Now which of those Chinese labels should you say meant firecrackers, Langton?" asked my companion.

"That one," I answered. "It is placed above those bunches of rockets."

"I think so too. Now fix that sign in your mind. Our next objective is Coney Island."

It was evening before we arrived, and the shows were in full swing.

"Now, Langton, we have to find our Chinaman," said Crewe. "I am afraid that it is rather like searching for a needle in the proverbial haystack. Keep a sharp lookout for a Chinese tattooer, and we will take in each alley in rotation."

We traversed Coney Island and its purlieus for an hour and more without success. The booths, closely packed together, almost defied examination. One came upon them unexpectedly in corners, one stumbled round alleys upon the same streets that one had just quitted; our chance of singling out this particular booth seemed almost impossibly remote. Suddenly Crewe gripped my arm.

"You know that man?" he asked, pointing to a flashily dressed fellow who slunk along, with a peculiarly sinister gait, in front of us.

"No," I replied.

Egan that Chinese criminal has consented to co-operate with him. The sight of the fire crackers has confirmed me in this belief. And if Thompson meets the English champion his death will be a foregone conclusion."

"But could they not encompass his death without such a meeting?" I asked.

"They could, undoubtedly. A fistic encounter between Egan or some hired bully and Thompson would have the same result, so far as Thompson is concerned. But there would be two drawbacks to such a plan. In the first place, the survivor would probably be arrested and have to stand his trial for manslaughter. In the second place, the encounter would not be without danger to the life of the other party. Whereas by making the Englishman the innocent participant in the murder, all danger is removed so far as concerns the conspirators."

I was more piqued than ever, but I knew that it was not Crewe's custom to explain his theories until the denouement. I revolved a dozen ideas in my mind. Could the Chinaman have injected some subtle poison which would be set in action only in the stress of a fistic encounter? My speculations were cut short by my perceiving Egan prepare to move away. In his farewell of the gun man there appeared to be a glance of perfect understanding.

"Follow him, Langton," whispered Crewe. "It is not essential that we know where he is going, but it is de-

The pair sauntered slowly along the avenue, despite the efforts of a fiery little man, apparently Thompson's trainer, who made wild endeavors to head him toward the elevated railroad. Thompson shook off the little man as though he were a fly, while his companions, evidently secure in their belief of the sailor's ability to dispose of the Englishman, trained or untrained, warmly seconded their mate. The little man gave up at last and, after shaking his first angrily in Thompson's face, disappeared among the crowds.

Thereupon Thompson and Egan, arm in arm, surrounded by a round dozen of their cronies, strolled slowly in the direction of the tattooer's booth.

I hastened after them, and, by making a detour, succeeded in getting ahead of them at the next block and in reaching the booth a couple of minutes across the alley to where I had left Crewe at the beer garden table.

Where was Crewe? Could that be he, that rough looking man, collarless, with dirty reversible cuffs and open waistcoat, his face flushed with drink, who was inviting all and sundry to come and sit down and drink at his expense? Undoubtedly it was Crewe, on closer inspection, for I had seen him in that same disguise upon a previous occasion; but I was certain that the sailor would never recognize him for the immaculate counselor of the afternoon.

turned to the tattooer and pushed Thompson into a chair. The Chinaman took out his needles and preparations and began his work.

There is some psychological moment when the noisiest crowd becomes momentarily silent. At such a time the voice of some individual will arise and dominate the mob. So, at the juncture, the drunken tones of Crewe came floating across the still air:

"To hell with the American eagle! A dozen sailors sprang round, glaring. 'What's that? What's that?' they cried. 'Who said that?'"

"I said that," shouted Crewe, rising and swaggering unsteadily toward them. "To—hell with the American eagle," he repeated with drunken gravity. "There's no Yank living but a little Canadian can knock the five-spot off every time."

There was a rush in Crewe's direction. In an instant he was surrounded by a mob of excited seamen, while new friends made themselves scarce, evidently unwilling to share his unpopularity, yet not wholly absenting themselves, in case of further profit to come.

"You'll take that back," shouted a brawny sailorman, shaking his fist under Crewe's nose. "You'll eat the words or I'll make squash pie out of you."

"You will, will you?" replied Crewe sneeringly. "Twelve to one—twelve Yanks to one Canadian, and that about your measure. There ain't no man here I can't lick singly in a fight."

Crewe had forced his way to Thompson's side. The sailor had just been released from the tattooer's chair and was rearranging his clothes. Now hearing these words, he sprang up, glaring.

"Let me get at him," he shouted.

"No, no, Frank don't fight. You go to save your hands for tomorrow, Frank," cried his supporters.

"Let him fight," shouted Egan. "What's the odds. It won't take many seconds to put that slob out of business. Say, do you mean what you said?" he yelled, thrusting his face within an inch of Crewe's.

"I surely do, and here's to prove it," Crewe answered, and his fist shot out and caught Egan on the point of the jaw. I saw the man collapse, crumple up, and lie still. It was one of the cleanest fighting blows I had ever seen delivered.

Inflamed by the defeat of his friend, Thompson darted forward, his fists whirling like engine shafts. There was nothing of science shown. Crewe fought pluckily, but it was evident that he could not stand for long before those sledge-hammer blows. He sprang forward and the men clinched. I heard a short, quick snap, and heard the sailor utter an exclamation of pain. He fell back and looked down at his hands stupidly. One dangled limply from the wrist, as though it were broken.

"It was a foul blow, Langton," said Crewe to me on the following day. "But unquestionably it was justified for the saving of the man's life. By the way, I see that the Englishman easily defeated Thompson's substitute."

"What was the substance used by the tattooer?" I asked, knowing that Crewe's story would have to be drawn out of him piecemeal.

"One of the iodides," he answered, "and the most powerful explosive known. So violent are they in their action that, if a few grains be strewn upon the face of a watch, the hands coming in contact with them, will detonate them and blow the whole watch to pieces."

"How did you come to suspect that this substance had been used, and how was it intended to work?"

"Do you remember what they used to rub into soldiers' wounds in older days, Langton?" my companion asked.

I shook my head.

"Gunpowder. The explosives have the property of being very well tolerated by the tissues of the human body. Thompson's statement that the tattooing caused barely any irritation, the peculiarly blue appearance of the scar, and the relationship existing between Egan and the Chinaman, who was connected with a firm of firecracker importers, all confirmed me in my suspicion. The plan was, undoubtedly, to let Thompson meet the Englishman, when the first hard blow that he received upon the chest would certainly have detonated the explosive and blown out the vital organs of the body, producing instant death."

"You know that, when a foreign substance enters the tissues, nature, unable to reject it, renders it harmless by encysting it. It was the fear that this encysting process might already have begun which caused Egan to insist upon a second application."

"If the substance could have been removed, I would have confided in Thompson. But any attempt to cut out the explosive would have caused an immediate detonation. My problem, therefore, was to prevent the fight by rendering Thompson powerless without striking him upon the chest, as Egan hoped I would when he incited him to attack me. And but for that," concluded Crewe, "with a touch of pride in his tones, 'I think I could have given a better account of myself in our little tussle.'"

"I suppose there is no chance of bringing the criminals to justice," I suggested. "Thompson would be the first to take the part of Egan. At least he ought to know the truth."

"What for?" asked Crewe. "He will be well protected in the ship's hospital, the explosive will have become encysted with a few days, and Thompson will certainly inherit that legacy. Langton, he said, looking at me whimsically, 'you, as a lawyer, ought to know that the wise man is he who knows when to keep his mouth shut.'"



He fell back and looked down at his hands stupidly.

"That's Egan," he answered. "Disguised, but he could not take out that wrinkle above the eyebrow. Now follow him."

We followed him for five minutes or more; then he turned aside abruptly and came to a halt in front of a Japanese rice-cake booth, in a corner of which we now perceived a savage-looking Mongolian seated apparently aimlessly, staring out upon the crowds.

"You recognize the firecracker symbol?" asked Crewe.

I did not recognize it and should never have remembered those apparently meaningless hieroglyphics. Crewe, however, seemed to be in high spirits.

"Now a great deal hinges upon one thing," he said. "It is my belief that Thompson did not tell us his whole story. In other words, I believe that he has been induced to return for a final treatment either tonight or tomorrow."

"Surely not immediately before the fight," I suggested.

"Sailors have no common sense about themselves. Ten to one he will be here. The only thing to do is to wait for him."

There was a conveniently secluded place across the alley. Since neither of us was known to Egan, it was arranged that we should take our seats within this beer garden and remain there.

"Langton," said Crewe, when we were seated with our full glasses before us, "I am more than ever confirmed in my belief that a most ingenious and diabolical plot has been hatched for that young seaman's death, and that in return for services rendered him by

sirable in case more mischief is brewing. Do not be more than fifteen minutes, though, in any event."

I went in pursuit of Egan, who moved off furtively through the crowds. He made his way in the direction of the American camp, where the sailors of the English fleet were being regaled at a clamor by their American comrades. The affair was practically over; as I approached the canvas tent which had been set up I perceived a hilarious crowd, composed of the crews of both nations, streaming out arm in arm, laughing and chattering together. Egan made his way toward a large gathering of men which seemed to form the nucleus of the mob.

Suddenly the crowd opened and I perceived Thompson struggling in the arms of a dozen sturdy patriots, who, elated with the festive meal, insisted, apparently, in carrying him in state down the main avenue of Coney. He regained his feet at last and stood in their midst, flushed and a little unsteady. I was astonished to see that he had evidently been drinking, in spite of his training. At the same moment he perceived Egan.

"Hello, Phil," he shouted, and shook the man by the hand warmly; then he swung his arms around him. It was evident that prudence was no part of the sailor's nature. I reasoned that, angered by the unsatisfactory result of his interview with Crewe and myself that morning, he had experienced an entire revulsion of feeling. Doubtless Egan was now, to him, his best friend, and we were malice and conspirators against his much-wounded relative. I wondered how much he would tell Egan; whether he would put him upon his guard.

Crewe was acting his part to the life.

"Here! Garçon!—Walter!" he yelled. "Bring us a quart bottle of fizzy drink. And say, you see that the ice's cold, or I'll knock your block off." And he flung down a fifty dollar bill upon the beer-soaked table, while the waiter ran to seize with avidity.

As I lingered near, Crewe's sharp eye was turned on me.

"Come here, bo," he yelled. "Have a drink. Gemmen, a friend. My friend—gemmen," he added in introduction; and, rather disgusted with the part we were to play, I sat down at an adjoining table, which was already filled with Crewe's strange guests.

None of them addressed me, however, being all apparently bent upon the possibility of extracting some money from Crewe.

Then the uproarious crowd of sailors turned into the alley and lined up in front of the booth. I heard Egan's voice ring out, apparently to another some protest.

"Shut your face," he yelled to the objector. "Let him be vaccinated if he wants to be. Show 'em your chest, Frank. Look, boys. Ain't that the finest eagle you've ever seen? That's the Yankee eagle," he continued, "and I don't want anybody to tell me that Frank can't beat the Britisher with that eagle on his chest. If anybody tells me so," he continued, looking around, "let him step up and say so, and I'll smash his face in."

Either nobody disagreed with the speaker's views, or else each of the sailors felt that his face would be more suitable if it were not smashed in. With a look of triumph Egan

turned to the tattooer and pushed Thompson into a chair. The Chinaman took out his needles and preparations and began his work.

There is some psychological moment when the noisiest crowd becomes momentarily silent. At such a time the voice of some individual will arise and dominate the mob. So, at the juncture, the drunken tones of Crewe came floating across the still air:

"To hell with the American eagle! A dozen sailors sprang round, glaring. 'What's that? What's that?' they cried. 'Who said that?'"

"I said that," shouted Crewe, rising and swaggering unsteadily toward them. "To—hell with the American eagle," he repeated with drunken gravity. "There's no Yank living but a little Canadian can knock the five-spot off every time."

There was a rush in Crewe's direction. In an instant he was surrounded by a mob of excited seamen, while new friends made themselves scarce, evidently unwilling to share his unpopularity, yet not wholly absenting themselves, in case of further profit to come.

"You'll take that back," shouted a brawny sailorman, shaking his fist under Crewe's nose. "You'll eat the words or I'll make squash pie out of you."

"You will, will you?" replied Crewe sneeringly. "Twelve to one—twelve Yanks to one Canadian, and that about your measure. There ain't no man here I can't lick singly in a fight."

Crewe had forced his way to Thompson's side. The sailor had just been released from the tattooer's chair and was rearranging his clothes. Now hearing these words, he sprang up, glaring.

"Let me get at him," he shouted.

"No, no, Frank don't fight. You go to save your hands for tomorrow, Frank," cried his supporters.

"Let him fight," shouted Egan. "What's the odds. It won't take many seconds to put that slob out of business. Say, do you mean what you said?" he yelled, thrusting his face within an inch of Crewe's.

"I surely do, and here's to prove it," Crewe answered, and his fist shot out and caught Egan on the point of the jaw. I saw the man collapse, crumple up, and lie still. It was one of the cleanest fighting blows I had ever seen delivered.

Inflamed by the defeat of his friend, Thompson darted forward, his fists whirling like engine shafts. There was nothing of science shown. Crewe fought pluckily, but it was evident that he could not stand for long before those sledge-hammer blows. He sprang forward and the men clinched. I heard a short, quick snap, and heard the sailor utter an exclamation of pain. He fell back and looked down at his hands stupidly. One dangled limply from the wrist, as though it were broken.