Chapter VII

How Tom Spring and Bill Neate Fought

Up to the time when Tom entered the ring, Bill Neate had been the one object of all eyes. Neate was a splendidly-made man, all muscle and sinew, but hardly the ideal athlete. He had enormous strength, but there was a lack of symmetry in his build. His rugged, somewhat repellent face indicated great determination, and that he was a sturdy boxer was shown by his terrific fight some time before with the dreaded "Gasman," whose punishing powers were something phenomenal. To look at the bosses of muscle around Neate's neck and shoulders and in the upper half of the arms, one could imagine what driving force he could put into a blow when it was added to by the impetus of one of his mighty rushes, for which he was famous. He was animal strength, but there was no grace in his movements.

On Spring doffing his "beaver" and vaulting over the ropes with the agility of a practised gymnast, a roar of voices hailed him, and the women's eyes glistened. They saw in Tom the perfect man—a combination of Apollo and Hercules. Not that his proportions were Herculean, but because his muscles were so equally developed and his frame so harmonious that both would have satisfied the requirements of a sculptor. His face matched his body. He was handsome; he was intelligent. No one less like the traditional "pug" ever stepped into the prize ring.

As Tom walked across the roped enclosure to his corner, where Tom Cribb and Ned Painter (the only man by whom Spring was ever beaten), his seconds, were awaiting him, the light elastic tread and the perfect action of his muscles showed how well his strength was under control.

Any doubt Jack Ralstone might have had that Spring would not carry off the belt vanished when Tom, stripped for the fight, strode to his corner. He had never seen Tom in the buff, for when they had a playful set-to they had simply taken off their coats and waistcoats, and he was amazed at Spring's physical development. Moreover, he was in the pink of condition, neither under nor over-trained. Ralstone was not far from Spring's corner, and Tom, chancing to look round, caught his eye, smiled and nodded.

"I've backed you for all I'm worth and a little more," shouted Ralstone.

"Thank you, sir. I shall do my best, you may be sure," said Tom simply.

At that moment Jack felt a touch on his shoulder. He turned and recognised Dillnot, the Somersetshire grazier, with whom he had made a bet at "The Angel and Sun." The grazier looked uncommonly serious.

"Just a word wi' you, Mr. Ralstone," said the grazier in a low voice. "A queer story reached me about a fall-out atween you an' Squire Halstead. If it hadna' ha' been that I got a bet on wi' 'ee, I shouldn't ha' bothered, but——"

"You're afraid you wouldn't get your money, supposing I lost, eh?" said Jack, cutting him short.

“Aye. Seems to me, young gentleman, you be agoing the whole hog. I heerd you betting with Sir Phineas Tenbury, an’ to a pretty tune. If Neate wins——”

“If Neate wins!” repeated Jack contemptuously. “He can’t win excepting by an accident. Don’t worry, Mr. Dillnot, you’ll be paid, never fear. By the way, you mentioned the Squire. The thing seems to have got wind, so there’s no good in beating about the bush. Yes, we’ve quarrelled and I’ve nothing more to do with him. By the way, where is he? I expected to see him on the ground, but he’s nowhere about.”

“Aye, an’ he’s not likely to be. I told him as the mill was coming off somewhere near here, but he would have it Hungerford was the spot. You know how pigheaded he can be. It wasn’t no good contradicting. so I let him have his way and away he’s gone to Hungerford wi’ a lot o’ other fules.”

Jack burst into a laugh. He could picture Simon Halstead’s rabid rage on finding himself sold.

Further talk with Dillnot was impossible. Ominous growlings were heard from the crowd. They resented the favour shown to the nobs who were allowed to stand close to the ropes, pressing against them and obstructing the view. Gentleman Jackson was equal to the emergency. He knew that the roughs would show but scant ceremony when their tempers were roused, and he appealed to the Corinthians to draw further back. “No persons but the referee and the umpires can he allowed near the ropes,” he shouted in his clear, stentorian voice, “and I ask you gentlemen to retire to a little distance from the ring and to help keep the ground clear.”

The word of the “General” was law. Many of the noblemen gathered round were his pupils, and highly respected him. They obeyed without hesitation, and the malcontents were satisfied.

Then came the tying of the combatants’ colours—Neate’s orange-yellow and Spring’s blue—to the stakes, and all was in readiness. The yells, the shouts, the buzz of talk, the laughter, died away. A deathlike silence followed for a brief space, when the two combatants advanced to the scratch and gravely shook hands to show there was no ill-feeling.

A curious sound, like the sighing of a soft wind, rose from the huge crowd. It was the end of a long-drawn sigh of suspense. Not a soul was there whose nerves and muscles did not tighten in sympathy with the gladiators. who stood facing one another, eye fixed on eye as if measuring their chances. They remained thus, almost motionless, for nearly two minutes.

The curious thing was that neither man showed the excitement of the spectators. This excitement was the more intense because it was restrained, and betrayed only by tightly-drawn lips and in the fixed glare of dilated eyes. Who shall say what was the hypnotic effect of 30,000 minds concentrated upon the efforts of two men? Outwardly, at all events, they showed no signs of being conscious of any outside influence. It did not seem as if at that moment there was a single person in the world other than their two selves. They might have been statues.

But there was a difference in their expressions. Spring, cool and confident, was if anything the more serious of the two. Possibly he felt that the issue depended on his science, his skill as a tactician, his activity of body. Neate, on the other hand, though an accomplished boxer, had not the resources possessed by his antagonist. He relied upon his attack, upon that mighty

hit of his with which he did such execution in the terrific fight with the famous “Gasman,” one of the most formidable fighters who ever hurled his beaver into the prize ring. There was just the semblance of a smile of contempt on his hard face. It was known that he had made certain of victory, and maybe he was thinking of how he should punish the presumptuous Spring for his temerity in challenging him for the championship and the belt.

And so the two long minutes—to the spectators an intolerable time—passed, and then suddenly Tom’s left arm shot out, quick as lightning. The opening he sought for had not come. Neate avoided the blow but did not retaliate, and once more came an ominous pause as long as the first one. The real fight began when Neate let fly one of his tremendous lunges. But Tom was ready. He timed the blow with amazing accuracy, and Neate’s fist never got home. The pent-up emotion of the crowd burst out at this pretty exhibition of skill, and shouts of applause resounded. Again Neate attempted a furious rush and again failed, Spring nodding and smiling as much as to say, “I expected this sort of thing.”

“What the deuce be Bill Neate doing?” growled Dillnot angrily. “Tom’s got his hands down and Bill’s losing his chance.”

“Perhaps he knows better than you, Dillnot,” whispered Jack. “Can’t you see that Spring wants him to come on?”

Probably this was so, for Tom had laid himself open to attack, but Neate declined the challenge. Both men spurned mere slogging, and the scientific set-to which followed the momentary cessation of hostilities is said to be one of the finest ever seen. Spring’s attitude for administering punishment was that of a model boxer, and Neate was hard put to defend himself, but he did it, to the huge delight of his supporters. Then came a succession of exchanges, and Spring dispelled all notions that he was not a hard hitter. One blow which reached his opponent’s head was delivered with such force that the impetus turned the striker round.

The fighting became intense. Neate was working for all he was worth to get in his favourite crusher, and Tom was busy with feet and hands. In retreating he was forced back into a corner, close against the stake, and it looked as if he could not escape the sledgehammer fist that was awaiting its opportunity. It was a critical moment, and Tom Belcher, Neate’s second, yelled out excitedly:

“Now’s the time!”

And it certainly was if Neate could only have got through Spring’s guard. But this he found impossible. Tom frustrated every attempt, and was fighting his way out when Neate, in despair of using his favourite stroke, closed with his adroit opponent, and for a minute or two nothing was seen but a couple of writhing, struggling bodies. Neate was the heavier man and a fine wrestler, and his adherents, making sure that he would throw Spring and fall upon him with his whole weight, cheered him to the echo. Neate, indeed, nearly got Tom off his legs, and the Spring-ites began to look glum, when the unexpected happened. The crowd held its breath. It saw Neate suddenly lifted from the ground, turned over in Tom’s arms, and thing heavily to the ground, and Tom falling upon him. It was an amazing piece of dexterity, and the betting at once rose to 7 to 4 on Spring.

The first round was over. It had lasted nine to ten minutes, but it could not be said that great damage had been suffered on either side. Of the two, Neate had had the worst of it. Tom’s

tactics were evidently to weaken him, and the Somersetshire man's supporters began to be restive. Why did he not inflict some of those tremendous hits for which he was famous? It was an unreasonable question, and those who asked it forgot the reason. They had not reckoned with Spring's extraordinary skill.

Meanwhile Jack Ralstone had managed to book a few bets at the new price. His mind was fixed on Spring's victory, and he refused to believe that anything else could happen. Once, indeed, he cast a glance at Sir Phineas, and he exulted when he saw his enemy biting his lips and scowling. At the same time he wondered, supposing he won, whether he should get his money from the spendthrift baronet. But there was the duel to be reckoned with first.

The second round commenced with the backers of Spring in high spirits. As before both men were cautious, and a long pause followed, Neate evidently seeking an opening. But he found none. Tom stood in an easy attitude, and his handsome face wore a look of the utmost confidence. Then Neate seemed to lose patience and darted out with his right. It fell short, and Spring's reply was a smart tap over his opponent's eye—so smart, indeed, that the blood followed.

"First blood, Neate," was heard in Tom's voice all over the ring, and Neate, who had staggered under the blow, scowled savagely and, recovering himself, again tried one of his heavy lunges, but again he failed to get home. Quick as thought Spring retaliated and with such vigour that Neate reeled and was within an ace of falling. His party showed such dissatisfaction with their man that some of them indulged in a prolonged "Yah." Stung by this, Neate dashed in blows desperately and wildly. Tom met the attack with the utmost coolness, and with a succession of skilful hits sent his man to grass with the utmost ease.

The utmost consternation reigned among the Neate-ites. They never expected anything like this. When the rival party yelled, "It's all up. Neate hasn't a chance!" they remained glum and silent. Two to one was offered on Spring in a hundred places, but there were no takers. As for Spring, he was jubilant.

"It's as right as the day," said he to Ned Painter, his second, who was preparing him for the next round. "He can't hit me in a week."

Clearly the idol had been knocked from his pedestal. As a boxer Neate was not in the same rank as Spring. He could now only rely on his luck. Luck goes for a good deal in a prize-fight, and so Bill discovered, but it was bad and not good luck. In the third round he restored the drooping spirits of his backers by his cleverness in turning aside a heavy blow, and they applauded him, and Tom, with the chivalry of one who, sure of victory, could afford to be generous to an opponent, called out, "Well stopped, Neate."

After this there was more caution, and the two were so close that their toes touched. If Neate ever had a chance it had come now, but he could never get past Spring's unbreakable guard. But by pertinacity he managed to land a heavy one on Tom's ribs and a spasm of pain went over Spring's face. His answer was a clutch, and after a stiff bit of wrestling they fell, with Neate underneath.

The fourth round showed that Neate, to use a modern phrase, had had some of the "stuffing" knocked out of him. His only chance was to attack, but for some reason he did not do so. The experts standing round were sure that to attempt to fight Spring scientifically was the way to be beaten. He ought to have gone in for heavy hitting, regardless of punishment, and his

supporters groaned aloud when Tom treated his blows, delivered from a distance, as though they were they blows of a child. One or two of Neate's efforts were so palpably useless that derisive laughter, the most galling sound that a boxer can hear, burst out in more than one quarter. The round ended in the usual wrestling rally, and was ended by Neate being thrown with terrific force, Spring of course adding to the severity of the fall by hurling his weight upon the prostrate man.

The fifth round was little more than a farce. Neate made no attempt at leviathan blows; indeed, he seemed rather inclined to fall rather than meet Spring's steady, workmanlike onslaught, over which Tom showed not the slightest hurry. From Neate's demeanour it was pretty evident that something had happened which was not in the programme. What that something was disclosed itself in a few words uttered by Tom Belcher, who, with a serious look on his face, came to the side of the rope and spoke to Mr. Jackson.

"Neate can't go on," said he in a low voice. "His arm's fractured."

"I perceive it," was Jackson's reply, "but I shall not notice it to the other side."

The last three rounds were tame enough. Neate struggled on gamely and tried to get in some of his deadly blows, but Spring stopped them almost contemptuously. Perhaps he suspected what was amiss with Neate, but it was no business of his; so long as Neate stood up to him, so long he would have to fight. Anyhow he treated his opponent tenderly, and contented himself with avoiding Neate's futile efforts for a "knock-out." Long before the eighth round had ended by Neate being struck down and unable to come up to time, all interest in the fight was over. A growl of disappointment burst from Neate's supporters when the Bristol man rose and shook hands with his conqueror, but the growls were checked on Neate announcing, almost with tears in his eyes, that he could fight no more, for his arm was broken.

"You've pulled it off, Mr. Ralstone, an' I'll pay 'ee," grumbled Dillnot. "Dang it, but you be main lucky. If Bill hadn't had that mishap, he'd 'a' pounded your man to a jelly afore the fight was over."

"That isn't what Cribb and the P.R. men say—Neate's backers among 'em," retorted Jack. "Tom had Neate well in hand before the fourth round, and it wasn't till then the accident happened."

"Well, it doan't much matter, do it? What's done's done. Here's your money. Don't fling it in the London gutters as too many of you young Corinthians do. Another bit o' counsel. Keep out o' old Squire Halstead's way. He'll be fit to knock your head off if he sees you. He said a few ugly things about 'ee as I wouldn't like to tell 'ee."

"I can quite believe it. Anyhow, we're not likely to meet."

Dillnot untied a greasy leather bag and took from it five hundred pounds in gold and notes. Jack stuffed the five hundred pounds in his pockets without counting it.

"Ye don't vally money, young Squire," said the grazier pityingly. "Take care as ye don't coome to want it. An' if I was you I'd look after Bill Weare. He's a slippery card."

Ralstone was inclined to be of the same opinion, and seeing the money-lender, after exchanging a few hurried words with Sir Phineas, squeezing his way through the crowd in

company with a big, burly man, he went after him and clapped his hand on his shoulder. Weare turned round in affright.

“Sorry to detain you, Mr. Weare, but it’s the rule for bets to be paid on the nail. I’ll trouble you for one hundred pounds,” said Jack coolly.

“Eh? Oh, yes,” faltered Weare, “but I don’t carry the Mint about with me.”

“I didn’t ask you for the Mint, but only for a trifling hundred pounds.”

“By thunder, Weare,” said the big man at his side with a loud strident laugh, “the young swell had you there. Pay up, old cock. Faith, it’s the best joke I’ve ever heard. I’d walk twenty miles to see a miserly money-lender part with his coin and get nothing for it.”

“What are you talking about, Jack Thurtell.” exclaimed Weare whiningly. “You know as well as anybody that I never carry much money about with me.”

“That’s not true,” cut in Ralstone quickly. “You had plenty when you made the bet with me at the ‘Angel and Sun.’”

“That’s right, young gentleman,” cried Thurtell boisterously. “Stick to him. Shall I search his pockets for you? Maybe he’s got a secret one he never shows in public.”

The burly man brought his hand down on the small of Weare’s back with a force which made the money-lender jump.

“Thank you,” said Ralstone in a polite but distinctly hostile tone, “but gentlemen don’t collect their debts like footpads. I prefer to trust to Mr. Weare’s honour.”

“More fool you,” said Thurtell with a truculent look.

Jack Ralstone instinctively disliked Weare’s friend Thurtell. He had a hard, strong face, which bore the indications of evil ungovernable passions. Jack did not want to have anything to say to him, and he turned away abruptly. But Thurtell was not to be put off. He had been drinking heavily and was in the mood to force a quarrel upon anyone.

“Here, you,” he shouted, “are you one of the stuck-up nobs that talk like parrots about boxing, but don’t know their right fist from their left?”

Ralstone measured the abusive bully. He was tall and very strongly made, and doubtless could fight. Jack was in no humour to box a ruffian. There was no glory in getting a black eye from such an antagonist or in giving one either.

“I don’t think I am,” he retorted quietly.

“I don’t care whether you are or not. You’ve insulted my friend Weare and I’m going to take it out of you. I’m Jack Thurtell of Norwich, and as I’ve had a turn up with Ned Carter, you’ll take it I know how to use my fists. Put up yours and let’s see who’s best man.”

The bellicose, half-drunken Thurtell threw himself into a pugilistic attitude, and Ralstone saw there was nothing left but to fight. He had hardly time to raise his hands before Thurtell was upon him. A straight blow aimed at his face Jack neatly caught on his elbow, and he let fly

with his left, catching Thurtell just below the ear. Thurtell had ducked his head, but not quickly enough, and down he went full length. He sprang to his feet, but being a heavy man and out of condition, he had not recovered himself sufficiently and Ralstone planted, a hot 'un somewhere near the midriff. Thurtell was doubled up with pain, and he sent out a volley of oaths in lieu of blows.

Ralstone was ready to administer more punishment when his arm was tightly grasped. Lord Walsham was at his side.

"Don't be a fool, Ralstone," he remonstrated. "What's the good of fighting that blackguard?"

"No good at all," panted Jack. "But I had to do it. He was going for me hot and strong."

"Well, you've given him a lesson. Now come away. That rascal's bound to have some of his friends near. You'd better look out for reprisals."

It was clear Thurtell had no fight left in him. He was still writhing on the ground. When he saw Ralstone going off with Lord Walsham, he yelled out:

"We've got to settle this score some day, damn you. Jack Thurtell's not the man to let a stuck-up Corinthian ride rough shod over him. I'll spoil your beauty for you yet."

"Who's the ruffian?" said Ralstone.

"No good. Gets his living by his wits and his bullying. I'm told he's known as 'Terrible Jack.' He's been mixed up in more than one shady affair. He and his friend Weare, the money-lender, are just now as thick as thieves. Wait till they fall out."

The mention of Weare brought to Jack Ralstone's mind the money-lender's debt. The "scrap" with Thurtell had driven all other things out. He looked round. Weare had seized the opportunity to escape.

"No matter. I've his address—Lyons Inn."

"Humph, if you think Weare will pay his debts of honour," said the young nobleman dryly, "you're living in a fool's paradise. Men like Weare don't know what honour is."

"Very likely. And what about Tenbury. He's mizzled too."

"Oh, Tenbury'll pay if he can borrow the coin. As you're going to fight him, he'll do anything rather than not meet you on equal terms. He's that sort of fellow. He boasts of not being under an obligation to any man in the world, barring money-lenders, Jews, and tradesmen, and they don't count. They're not worth his notice."

"Well, he can do as he likes. The end of the duel may be that it won't matter to me whether he pays up or not. Anyhow, for the moment I'm more interested in scooping up my gains than in anything else. I'll tell you why later on. Luckily the men who are in my debt are not all Weares and Tenburys."

This was the fact, and for the next half-hour he was busy in settling with those who had betted with him on the ground. When all was done he found that he had a respectable sum with which to start life in London. He could afford to wait for Sir Phineas Tenbury's money.

“We shall have a bother in getting to town. You know this country better than I do. What do you propose?” asked the young lord.

“It’s no good trying to get a seat in the coach. There’ll be something like a free fight for places. And I doubt if a postchaise is to be had at any price. We can’t stay in Andover and be starved. They told me at the ‘George’ this morning they’d only got bones in the larder. Why not tramp it to Salisbury and take the coach there? Salisbury’s out of the beaten track.”

“How far?”

“Oh, twelve miles or so.”

“Good. Then let’s start. By the way, where are you staying in town?”

“Don’t quite know. Maybe at the ‘Tavistock,’ Covent Garden. They know me there.”

“A bit noisy, isn’t it? Why not put up at my place in the Albany?”

Jack thanked Walsham for his proffered hospitality, but said that he’d made up his mind to go on his own.

“I shall have to do it sooner or later, and I’d better get used to the sensation.”

Then he told his friend how he had quarrelled with his stepfather—a piece of news which made Lord Walsham shake his head.

“How are you going to live?”

“The deuce only knows. If I’m stranded I may take up boxing.”

“Faith, a fine living you’ll make at that game. All your future will be—a tavern. That’s the only thing the retired pug thinks of. I fancy I see you drawing pints of heavy wet or quarterns of ‘max’ (gin) for the greasy mob.”

Jack laughed but made no reply. There was sense in the young nobleman’s words, as he well knew.

Then they set out at a good four-mile pace for their spin to Salisbury.