

## Long Odds

By Kenneth Grahame

FOR every honest reader there exist some half-dozen honest books, which he re-reads at regular intervals of six months or thereabouts. Whatever the demands on him, however alarming the arrears that gibber and grin in menacing row, for these he somehow generally manages to find time. Nay, as the years flit by, the day is only too apt to arrive when he reads no others at all ; the hour will even come, in certain instances, when the number falls to five, to four—perhaps to three. With this same stride of time comes another practice too—that of formulating general principles to account for or excuse one's own line of action ; and yet it ought not to be necessary to put forward preface or apology for finding oneself immersed in *Treasure Island* for about the twentieth time. The captain's capacities for the consumption of rum must always be a new delight and surprise ; the approaching tap of the blind man's stick, the moment of breathless waiting in the dark and silent inn, are ever sure of their thrill ; hence it came about that the other night I laid down the familiar book at the end of Part the Second—where vice and virtue spar a moment ere the close grip—with the natural if commonplace reflection that nineteen to six was good healthy odds.

But somehow I was in no hurry to take the book up again.

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The mental comment with which I had laid it down had set up a yeasty ferment and a bubble in my brain ; till at last, with a start, I asked myself how long was it since I had been satisfied with such a pitiful majority on the side of evil ? Why, a certain number of years ago it would have been no majority at all—none, at least, worth speaking of. What a change must have been taking place in me unsuspected all this time, that I could tamely accept, as I had just done, this pitiful compromise (I can call it nothing else) with the base law of probabilities ! What a totally different person I must have now become, from the hero who sallied out to deal with a horde of painted Indians, armed only with his virtue and his unerring smoothbore ! Well, there was some little comfort in the fact that the fault was not entirely my own, nor even that of the irresistible years.

Frankly, in the days I look back to, this same *Treasure Island* would not have gone down at all. It was not that we were in the least exacting. We did not ask for style ; the evolution of character possessed no interest whatever for us ; and all scenery and description we sternly skipped. One thing we *did* insist on having, and that was good long odds against the hero ; and in those fortunate days we generally got them. Just at present, however, a sort of moral cowardice seems to have set in among writers of this noblest class of fiction ; a truckling to likelihood, and a dirty regard for statistics. Needless to say, this state of things is bringing about its inevitable consequence. Already one hears rumours that the boy of the period, instead of cutting down impalpable bandits or blowing up imaginary mines and magazines, is moodily devoting himself to golf. The picture is a pitiful one. Heaven hath blessed him, this urchin, with a healthy appetite for pirates, a neat hand at the tomahawk, and a simple passion for being marooned ; instead of which, he now plods about the country

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playing golf. The fault is not his, of course ; the honest heart of him beats sound as ever. The real culprits are these defaulting writers, who, tainted by realism, basely shirk their duty, fall away from the high standard of former days, and endeavour to represent things as they possibly might have happened. Nineteen to six, indeed ! No lad of spirit will put up with this sort of thing. He will even rather play golf ; and play golf he consequently does.

The magnificent demand of youth for odds—long odds, whatever the cost !—has a pathetic side to it, once one is in a position to look back, thereon squinting gloomily through the wrong end of the telescope. At the age of six or seven, the boy (in the person of his hero of the hour) can take on a Genie, an Afreet or two, a few Sultans and a couple of hostile armies, with a calmness resembling indifference. At twelve he is already less exacting. Three hundred naked Redskins, mounted on mustangs and yelling like devils, pursue him across the prairie and completely satisfy his more modest wants. At fifteen, 'tis enough if he may only lay his frigate alongside of two French ships of the line ; and among the swords he shall subsequently receive on his quarter-deck he will not look for more than one Admiral's ; while a year or two later it suffices if he can but win fame and fortune at twenty-five, and marry the Earl's daughter in the face of a whole competitive House of Lords. Henceforward all is declension. One really has not the heart to follow him, step by dreary step, to the time when he realises that a hero may think himself lucky if he can only hold his own, and so on to the point when it dawns on him at last that the gods have a nasty habit of turning the trump, and have even been accused of playing with loaded dice—an aphorism any honest boy would laugh to scorn.

Indeed, the boy may well be excused for rejecting with indignation these unworthy sneers at the *bona fides* of the autocrats who,  
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from afar, shift the pieces on this little board, and chuck them aside when done with, one by one. For he but sees the world without through the chequered lattice of the printed page, and there invariably the hero, buffeted though he may be of men, kicked by parents and guardians, reviled by colonels and first lieutenants, always has the trump card up his sleeve, ready for production in the penultimate chapter. What wonder, then, that the gods appear to him as his cheerful backers, ready to put their money on him whatever the starting price? Nay, even willing to wink and look the other way when he, their darling, gets a quiet lift from one of themselves, who (perhaps) may "have a bit on?" Meanwhile, to the wistful gazer through the lattice, his cloistral life begins to irk terribly. 'Tis full time he was up and doing. Through the garden gate, beyond the parish common, somewhere over the encircling horizon, lie fame and fortune, and the title and the bride. Pacific seas are calling, the thunder of their rollers seems to thrill to him through the solid globe that interposes between. Savages are growing to dusky manhood solely that he may flesh his sword on them; maidens are already entangling themselves in perilous situations that he, and he alone, may burst the bonds, eliminate the dragon, and swing them forth to freedom and his side. The scarlet sunsets scorn him, a laggard and a recreant; behind them lie arrogant cities, plains of peril, and all the tingling adventure of the sea. The very nights are big with reproach, in their tame freedom from the watch-fire, the war-whoop, the stealthy ambuscade; and every hedgerow is a boundary, every fence another bond. From this point his decadence dates. At first the dice spring merrily out on the board. The gods throw, and he; and they again, and then he, and still with no misgivings; those blacklegs know enough to permit an occasional win. All the same, early or late, comes that period in the game when

when suspicion grows a sickening certainty. He asked for long odds against him, and he has got them with a vengeance ; the odds of the loaded dice. While as for that curled darling he dreamed of, who was to sweep the board and declare himself the chosen, where is he ? He has dropped by the roadside, many a mile behind. From henceforth on they must not look to join hands again.

Some there are who have the rare courage, at the realising point, to kick the board over and declare against further play. Stout-hearted ones they, worthy of marble and brass ; but you meet them not at every turn of the way. Such a man I forgathered with by accident, one late autumn, on the almost deserted Lido. The bathing-ladders were drawn up, the tramway was under repair ; but the slant sun was still hot on the crinkled sand, and it was not so much a case of paddling suggesting itself as of finding oneself barefoot and paddling without any conscious process of thought. So I paddled along dreamily, and thought of Ulysses, and how he might have run the prow of his galley up on these very sands, and sprung ashore and paddled ; and then it was that I met him—not Ulysses, but the instance in point.

He was barelegged also, this elderly man of sixty or thereabouts : and he had just found a *cavollo del mare*, and exhibited it with all the delight of a boy ; and as we wandered together, cool-footed, eastwards, I learnt by degrees how such a man as this, with the mark of Cheapside still evident on him, came to be pacing the sands of the Lido that evening with me. He had been Secretary, it transpired, to some venerable Company or Corporation that dated from Henry the Seventh ; and among his duties, which were various and engrossing, was in especial that of ticking off, with a blue pencil, the members of his governing body, as they made their appearance at their weekly meeting ; in accordance with the practice  
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dating from Henry the Seventh. His week, as I have said, was a busy one, and hinged on a Board day ; and as time went on these Board days raced up and disappeared with an ever-increasing rapidity, till at last his life seemed to consist of but fifty-two days in the year—all Board days. And eternally he seemed to be ticking off names with a feverish blue pencil. These names, too, that he ticked—they flashed into sight and vanished with the same nightmare gallop ; the whole business was a great humming Zoetrope. Anon the Board would consist of Smith, Brown, Jackson, &c., Life Members all ; in the briefest of spaces Smith would drop out, and on would come Price, a neophyte—a mere youngling, this Price. A few more Board days flash by, and out would go Brown and maybe Jackson—on would come Cattermole, Fraser, Davidson—beardless juniors every one. Round spun the unceasing wheel ; in a twinkling Davidson, the fledgling, sat reverend in the chair, while as for those others——! And all the time his blue pencil, with him, its slave, fastened to one end of it, ticked steadily on. To me, the hearer, it was evident that he must have been gradually getting into the same state of mind as Rudyard Kipling's delightful lighthouse keeper, whom solitude and the ceaseless tides caused to see streaks and lines in all things, till at last he barred a waterway of the world against the ships that persisted in making the water streaky. And this may account for an experience of his in the Underground Railway one evening, when he was travelling home after a painful Board day on which he had ticked up three new boys into vacant places which seemed to have been hardly filled an hour. He was alone, he said, and rather sleepy, and he hardly looked at the stranger who got in at one of the stations, until he saw him deposit in the hat-rack—where ordinary people put their umbrellas—what might have been an umbrella, but looked, in the dim light of the Underground, far more like a scythe. Then he sat up and began

began to take notice. The elderly stranger—for he was both gaunt and elderly—nay, as he looked at him longer he saw he was old—oh so very old ! And one long white tuft of hair hung down on his wrinkled forehead from under his top hat,—the stranger squatted on the seat opposite him, produced a note-book and a pencil—a *blue* pencil too!—and leaning forward, with a fiendish grin, said, “ *Now I’m going to tick off all you fellows—all you Secretaries—right back from the days of Henry the Seventh !* ”

The Secretary fell back helplessly in his seat. Terror-stricken, he strove to close his ears against the raucous voice that was already rattling off those quaint old Tudor names he remembered having read on yellowing parchment ; but all was of no avail. The stranger went steadily on, and each name as read was ruthlessly scored out by the unerring blue pencil. The pace was tremendous. Already they were in the Commonwealth ; past flew the Restoration like a racehorse—the blue pencil wagged steadily like a nightmare—Queen Anne and her coffee-houses,—in a second they were left far behind ; and as they turned the corner and sped down the straight of the Georgian era, the Secretary sweated, a doomed man. The gracious reign of Victoria was full in sight—nay, on the stranger’s lips was hovering the very name of Fladgate—Fladgate whom the Secretary could himself just remember, a doddering old pensioner—when the train shivered and squealed into St. James’s Park Station. The Secretary flung the door open and fled like a hare, though it was not his right station. He ran as far as the Park itself, and there on the bridge over the water he halted, mopped his brow, and gradually recovered his peace of mind. The evening was pleasant, full of light and laughter and the sound of distant barrel-organs. Before him, calm and cool, rose the walls of the India Office, which in his simple way he had always considered a dream in stone. Beneath his feet a whole family of ducks circled

circled aimlessly, with content written on every feature ; or else, reversing themselves in a position denoting supreme contempt for all humanity above the surface, explored a new cool underworld a few inches below. It was then (he said) that a true sense of his situation began to steal over him ; and it was then that he awoke to the fact of another life open to him should he choose to grasp it. Neither the ducks nor the India Office (so he affirmed) carried blue pencils, and why should he ? The very next Board day he sent in his resignation, and, with a comfortable pension and some reminiscence (perhaps) of that frontage of the India Office, crossed the Channel and worked South till he came to Venice, where the last trace of blue-pencil nightmare finally faded away.

"And are you never bored ?" I tenderly inquired of him, as we rocked homewards in a gondola between an apricot sky and an apricot sea.

"During the first six months I was," he answered, frankly ; "then it passed away altogether, even as influenza does in time, or the memory of a *gaucherie*. And now every day lasts as long as a year of those Board days of old, and is fifty-two times as interesting. Why, only take this afternoon, for example. I didn't get over here till two, but first I met some newly-arrived Americans, and talked for a cycle with them ; and you never know what an American will be surprised at, or, better still, what he will not be surprised at ; and if you only think what that means—— Well, presently they left (they had to get on to Rome), so I went up to the platform over the sea and had oysters and a bottle of that delightful yellow wine I always forget the name of ; and æons passed away in the consumption. Each oyster lasted a whole Board day, and each glass of yellow wine three. Then I strolled along the sands for a century or so, thinking of nothing in particular. Lastly, I met you, and for some twelve months I've been boring

you with my uninteresting story. And even yet there's the whole evening to come ! Oh, I had lots of leeway to make up when I came over here ; but I think I shall manage it yet—in Venice ! ”

I could not help thinking, as I parted from him at the Piazzetta steps, that (despite a certain incident in the Underground Railway) here was one of the sanest creatures I had ever yet happened upon.

But examples such as this (as I said) are rare ; the happy-starred ones who know when to cut their losses. The most of us prefer to fight on—mainly, perhaps, from cowardice, and the dread of a plunge into a new element, new conditions, new surroundings—a fiery trial for any humble, mistrustful creature of use-and-wont. And yet it is not all merely a matter of funk. For a grim love grows up for the sword-play itself, for the push and the hurtle of battle, for the grips and the give-and-take—in fine, for the fight itself, whatever the cause. In this exaltation, far from ignoble, we push and worry along until a certain day of a mist and a choke, and we are ticked off and done with.

This is the better way ; and the history of our race is ready to justify us. With the tooth-and-claw business we began, and we mastered it thoroughly ere we learnt any other trade. Since that time we may have achieved a thing or two besides—evolved an art, even, here and there, though the most of us bungled it. But from first to last fighting was the art we were always handiest at ; and we are generally safe if we stick to it, whatever the foe, whatever the weapons—most of all, whatever the cause.