

"THE ACE OF CLUBS."

BY GEORGE FRANCIS CURRAN.



WILL you join us in a little game of poker, Doctor, or has the moonlight on the water a greater fascination?"

"I was scarcely thinking of the moon or water either," replied the Doctor, without glancing up to where we three stood waiting his answer.

"I was thinking of another steamboat ride I once took long years ago, but still decidedly fresh in my memory. It was on that ride I played my last game of poker, and I swore then by all I held sacred never again to play. Sit down and I'll tell you the story."

We sat facing the Doctor. We were all old friends of many years' standing. Prefacing his story by opening his cigar-case and passing us each one of his fragrant weeds, the Doctor remarked :

"I am not given to story-telling, and may make a bad job of this one, but I'll give you the facts just as they occurred, and you can fill in the details to suit yourselves. It was during the old steamboat days on the Mississippi, and I was bound from St. Louis to New Orleans. The steamer was well filled with passengers, and a right jolly crowd they formed. Poker games were running wide open, and everyone of the men dropped into some game or other during the trip. I was comparatively a young man then, and had but recently entered upon the practice of my profession. I was engaged to a handsome girl, who had moved with her parents to New Orleans. I had sold out everything I owned in St. Louis, and had ten thousand dollars in my belt, intending to use it in the purchase of a home for my future bride, in the South, where I proposed to settle. Of course, like many a young man, I thought I would try my luck at poker, and perhaps increase my little store of money, for I had noticed vast sums change hands during a game. On the second night out, I began to play. At first, I lost about fifty dollars. Then the tide seemed to change and I began to win, until six hundred dollars of other players' money was in my hands. But I wasn't go-

ing to be foolish ; I placed a limit on my winnings and mentally decided that when I had won a thousand dollars, I would quit. The game continued with varying luck to me, sometimes winning, often losing, until, recalled to my senses, by an unusually heavy loss, I realized that not only had my winnings gone, but over eleven hundred dollars of my own money. I was dumfounded and alarmed, but I resolved to play more carefully and win back what I had lost at least, and then withdraw. It would not do to lose all that money. I felt that I would never be able to forgive myself if I stopped without making an effort to recover what I had lost, so I played on. I need not tell you how the game progressed, how I won and lost, and lost and won, never getting nearer to my original amount, however, than four hundred dollars, which point I reached once. In an effort to obtain that missing four hundred, I played heavily. I had four kings, but what are four kings when another man has four aces? Your kings might as well be deuces. And so I learned when the hand was finally called and I saw my wagers move across the table away from me, and realized that I had but seven thousand dollars of my original fortune, and that over three thousand dollars of my money was in the hands of my fellow-players. I grew reckless. I resolved to win back what I had lost, if I had to lose all I had in the attempt. The betting was fast and furious. Players from the other tables gathered around us and watched our feverish faces and glistening eyes. At length there came a jack-pot which I knew would be my last, and I meant to stay in till I won or lost all. I had the king, queen, jack and ten spot of clubs, and the king of hearts. I discarded the king of hearts and stood to fill at either end for a straight or a straight flush, with a prospect of having a club flush, so that my opportunity for securing a good hand was excellent, as I thus had five chances so to do in the draw. All hands stayed in, but I never knew how many cards they called for. I wanted the ace of clubs, for I felt that with it I could win. I was wild with excitement, and knew that my all depended on the hand I was about to play, and I meant to play it to the end. But when the dealer in discarding accidentally turned the edge of his discard, and I saw that it was the ace of clubs, my spirits sank considerably. I knew I still had four chances left, so I waited with bated breath for the betting to begin. When my one card was dealt to me, I let it lie face down on the table. I did not care to see what it was. I was going to bet my 'pile,' and that was all there was to it.

There had been five players, but after the drawing, one dropped out leaving four of us to finish the game, and we went at it as though our lives depended upon the outcome. I felt that my future life certainly did depend upon it, and with a prayer for Nettie that for her sake the Fates would smile upon me, I bet each time to the limit. I had grown cooler now, and a calmness I could not then account for, came over me. I noticed that the dealer had gold filling in one of his upper teeth, that one of the players had a small scar under his left eye, that another of the players had a stain on his vest. Everything stood out to me then with an aggravated distinctness. The player who had withdrawn from the game had picked up the deck and discards, shuffled them carelessly, and was now running his hand apparently aimlessly over the edges, while watching the betting. I knew that he was counting the cards, for presently he laid them down as if satisfied. Finally, the hand was called, and when I raised my draw card to my hand, I saw, without a tremor, that the pot was mine. As soon as he saw my hand, the dealer grew livid, and in a hoarse voice, half whisper, exclaimed: "Where the devil did you get that card?"

"I told him that as he had dealt he ought to know. There was no use to dispute the deal in that crowd, so hastily grabbing up the deck, he ran through it, and then with a muttered curse, threw the cards on the floor, opened a fresh deck and began to shuffle it. But I withdrew from the game. I had had enough. On counting my winnings, I found that I was out only one hundred dollars on the game, and I was satisfied to let it go at that. It had been a good lesson to me, and I was willing to pay that much to have learned it."

"But what was the card you drew, Doctor?"

Reaching his hand into his waistcoat, the doctor carefully drew out a worn morocco pocketbook, and opening it, tenderly abstracted a well-preserved card which he held up by one corner for us to see in the moonlight. It was the Ace of Clubs.