

A Cross Roads Gambler.

'There was a paragraph in a Little Rock paper the other day,' said a commercial traveller who had just come in from an extended Western trip, 'that recalled to my mind some of the most exciting incidents I have run across in all my travelling for twenty years past. The paragraph was nothing very exciting in itself, but it mentioned the name of a man I had seen in various places and had never seen without wondering how he managed to stay on earth so long.'

'It said that a man who was known by the name of George Hobbs was lying in the hospital in Little Rock in imminent danger of death. He had been stabbed five or six times and the doctors declared that there was not one chance in a hundred of his recovery. They had tried to get him to tell how he came by his injuries, but he absolutely refused, though he had been warned that he would probably die. All he would say was that if he got well he would attend to things himself, and if he didn't there was no use making a fuss about it. The paper further said that he was believed to be a stranger in Little Rock, but that he had been seen two or three times in some of the less reputable resorts of the city within a few days of the time that he was picked up insensible on the street.'

'When I read it I was satisfied that this George Hobbs was in all probability the same George Hobbs that I had known as a travelling gambler for a number of years, and that what I had always expected would happen to him some time had happened at last. He was one of a class of men numerous enough a dozen or fifteen years ago, but not so frequently met recently in the country I travel, which is mainly the Mississippi Valley below St. Louis. At least I don't see so many of them as I used to.'

'They have always been called cross roads gamblers since I have known anything about them—I suppose from the fact that they go from one small town to another, with no settled home anywhere, always looking for a game of poker and picking up a more or less precarious living by their dexterity with the cards. The word crossroads, of course, comes from the implied sarcasm that they will stop anywhere in the country where two roads cross and wait for a game.'

'These men don't look alike any more than any other class of men resemble one another physically, but all that I ever saw had the characteristic appearance of all professional gamblers. They are somewhat more particular about their clothes, and about grooming themselves than the average among the men they associate with and they all had that studied repression of expression and constant watchfulness that you see in most gamblers.'

Hobbs was a little man, sandy of complexion and sparing of speech. I hardly ever heard him say an unnecessary word, and I used to wonder sometimes how so quiet a man ever found his way into a poker game among strangers, but he was usually playing when I saw him, so perhaps he was more of a talker when he was not at the table.

'The first time I ran across him was on one of the boats running from Memphis down the river. I got on at St. Helena to go to Vicksburg, and as I entered the saloon I saw a game in full progress at one of the tables. It was not a very unusual sight, for this was nearly twenty years ago, and there was considerable gambling on the river boats then, though not nearly as much as in earlier times. Nowadays there is less.'

'It was late in the evening and there were only two or three lookers on when I went up and joined the group, not to play but to watch the game. I never lost a chance of doing that, though I seldom play with strangers. This time I speedily found enough to interest me, for before I had looked on more than five minutes, I saw plainly that the little sandy man was cheating. He was not particularly dexterous about it, either, for if he had been, I probably would not have detected it though I have seen enough crooked play to be familiar with the ordinary tricks.'

'Hobbs, as I afterward learned his name to be, was marking the cards with his little fingernail as he handed them and was dealing whenever it came his turn to deal, slowly enough to enable him to tell where each marked card went. If he dealt from the bottom or juggled the cards in any other way in the deal I didn't detect it, but I could see the marking done plainly enough after I had noticed that his fingernail was trimmed to a sharp corner.

The wonder to me was that the other players didn't see it as plainly as I did, for they all were men who looked as if they had had experience enough to be on the lookout for such things. I thought at first that he had a confederate, but what happened afterward made this seem improbable, and now I fully believe he was playing alone.'

'Perhaps you may think I said something when I saw what was going on. If so, you underrate my intelligence. It made not a particle of difference to me whether one man or another of the five at the table should win the money, but it would have made a lot of difference to me if I had got mixed up in a fight over a matter that did not concern me. I hadn't the faintest desire to kill anybody and still less inclination to stop another man's billet or get stabbed as men do sometimes when they interfere with other people's business out west. So I looked on, very much interested and curious to see if any of the other players would see what I saw.'

'They were playing a pretty stiff game. I thought at first it might be ten dollar limit, for I didn't see a raise larger than that for the first twenty minutes I looked on, but then Hobbs made a raise of twenty-five after a two card draw and a big man who turned out to be a Texas cattleman went back at him with fifty more. Hobbs studied a while and then put a hundred dollar bill in the pot and the cattleman laid down. Then I thought it might be table stakes, but a dapper little fellow whom I had seen often in Memphis pulled money out of his pocket to make good in a pot that he won with a small flush, so I saw that it was the old fashioned game, with no limit. The ante was a dollar and the usual bet was five or ten, but occasionally as in the hands I mentioned there would be a big bet made. This happened often enough later in the game to make it interesting and I looked on fully two hours before it broke up.'

'I was watching Hobbs all the time and saw plainly that he marked each new deck as it came, for they called for several during the game. I watched the other players too, very carefully to see if they suspected anything, and I could see that Hobbs was on the same lookout, but to my continued surprise they made no sign. Hobbs was winning, naturally, but whether it was because of his caution, or whether he only played when he knew the cards were in his favor, he seemed to play a conservative game, and his winnings were not large enough of themselves to arouse suspicion.'

'At last the inevitable climax came. They had \$200 or \$300 in chips on the table, but big bills, twenties, fifties and hundreds, had been added to the money in sight till there was, perhaps, a thousand in the game, besides considerable sums that one and another had put away after winning. I noticed that Hobbs had carefully sunk each hundred that came to him in his job pocket till he must have had over a thousand in velvet, besides what was in front of him, when he made his final play.'

'It was a bold one. He sat next the dealer, and having two pairs, aces up, he saw that the one card he would get in the draw was also an ace. I say this because his play showed it, not because I could see the mark, for I could not, and would not have recognized it if I had seen it. All I knew was that he had certainly done some marking, and that he was watching so closely that he must have known. At all events, he opened the jack pot for \$10, having the first say. The Memphis man passed and the Texan came in. The next man, who looked like a lawyer, raised it \$20 more and the dealer laid down. Hobbs made it \$20 more and the Texan came back with \$90, making it \$70 more for the lawyer to play. He made good, and Hobbs showed up a hundred.'

'The Texan raised it again and the lawyer dropped. He had three queens, for I saw them before he threw them away, but he wisely concluded that even three queens before the draw was not good enough to stay with under a cross fire. Hobbs made good once more, and called for a card, getting of course the ace he knew was coming. The Texan stood pat, having, as I saw later, a ten full, and when Hobbs betted a hundred, he simply called. It was good play against a one card draw, though I was a little surprised at it, for he had been playing a bold game, and a ten full was a temptingly big hand. His call, however, made a show necessary, and of course Hobbs raked the pot.'

'As he pulled in the money I saw a queer expression come on the Texan's face. It

was not wholly of chagrin at the loss of his bets, but, as I read it was partly of chagrin and partly of suspicion. Hobbs saw it, too, I presume he had been expecting it and had made up his mind what to do when he came, for as the Texan reached over and picked up a discard pile with the evident intention of examining the cards. Hobbs thrust the money in front of him into his pocket and rising suddenly from his chair, leaped, rather than ran, toward the door of the saloon which was wide open as it was hot weather.'

'Quick as he was, the Texan was close behind him and I saw him pull his gun as he rushed after the fleeing gambler. We all followed, of course, and as I got to the saloon door I saw Hobbs leap from the rail of the boat into the water. The Texan fired once as he ran, but if he hit the other there was no sign of it apparent, for Hobbs came to the surface presently fully fifty feet away and swimming like a fish, despite the fact that he was fully dressed.'

'There was a lot of excited shouting and talk among those of us who were looking on, but the Texan was apparently the coolest man in the crowd. Squaring himself by the rail he laid his heavy revolver across his left elbow and taking careful aim he fired twice more at the swimmer before the captain of the boat came up and interfered, which he did as soon as he could reach the spot.'

'It looked as if his interference came too late, though, for the swimmer, at the second shot threw up his arms and disappeared under the surface of the water. Whether he was hit or not I don't know; but he was certainly not killed or seriously enough hurt to prevent his swimming ashore; but what we all thought then was that he was killed. It was too dark for us to see where he came up or whether he came up at all, though of course he did, and the captain of the boat, after looking intently for a moment or two, shook his head. 'It's no use sending a boat after him,' he said. 'No man on earth can keep alive in that current after he's got a bullet in him.' So we kept on our way, leaving Hobbs to his fate, and if anybody ever made a charge of manslaughter against the Texan I never heard of it. The general verdict was that it served Hobbs right, and the only regret I heard expressed was that so much good money had gone down with him.'

'You may imagine that I was rather astonished, some five years afterward to run across Hobbs in a saloon in New Madrid. He was playing poker in a back room and I looked at him for some minutes before I could be certain that it was the same man, but after I had watched him for awhile I knew that I could not be mistaken. More than that, I saw that he knew me, and was evidently considering what to do. He did not meet my eyes squarely for some minutes, but presently he did so, and I saw that he was looking for recognition. Then I saw that he was letting me know that he knew that I knew him. Quite complicated isn't it, but you can say a good deal with your eyes if you know how.'

'Pretty soon he cashed in, and strolled out to the barroom, and when I followed he spoke to me. 'I don't know what sort of a man you are,' he said, as coolly as if he were talking about the weather, 'but I reckon you won't have any objections to telling me whether you are going to try to make trouble for me.'

'I assured him that I had no such intention, explaining that my business was selling goods and that I preferred to make friends rather than enemies at every stage of the game. 'More than that,' I said, 'if I had wanted to make trouble for you I would have done it the night I saw you playing on the boat.'

'Yes,' he said, in the most matter of fact way, 'I saw you were on almost as soon as you came on board, and I was rather expecting you would interfere. So knowing that if those chumps ever did take a tumble they would have an outsider to back them up, I decided that the only thing to do was, to make a bolt for it in case they caught on.'

'Were you hit?' I asked him.

'No,' he said with a grin, 'but the bullets were coming uncomfortably close and I made up my mind the safest course was to make everybody think I was killed. The swimming was nothing. I reckon I swam four miles before I got ashore.'

'Naturally I set Mr. Hobbs down as more or less of a coward, or at least as a man who would rather run than fight, and not being anxious for his acquaintance, anyhow, I had little to say to him and was not sorry to hear him say he was leaving town that night. Whether he went away because I was there or not I neither knew nor cared. The next time I saw him, however, I decided that he was ready enough to fight when he saw fit to do so.'

'It was in a faro bank in Vicksburg that I ran across him about a year later. I was doing the town with a customer and among other things we decided to buck the

tiger for a small amount. When we got inside we found Hobbs playing, but as nobody seemed to know him, I said nothing. He was in hard luck apparently, for as my friend and I stood looking on for a few moments before buying chips, I saw him lose five stacks one after the other. What I also noticed that a piker, sitting at the other end of the table, was coppering his play right along, evidently counting either on Hobbs' bad luck or on some crooked work in the deal. Three times, when Hobbs played a card to win for a stack of reds this piker would play the same card to lose for four or five whites.'

'When he tried it for the fourth time Hobbs broke loose. Perhaps his losses had something to do with his loss of temper, but anyway he turned on his piker, who was twice his size, and gave him a tongue lashing for fair. I've heard men use language before, but I never heard anybody dig up such unexpected treasures in the way of odd, forcible curses words as he did. The piker didn't like it and said so, and that made Hobbs worse. Then the piker jumped for him, and if four or five other men hadn't interfered, I think Hobbs would have cut him into small pieces. He had a knife out in an instant and it was all the crowd could do to hold him till the other man got away.'

'Of course I don't know what happened to Hobbs in Little Rock. It may be that he is dead, or will die before he gets over his wounds. He must be mortal, like other people, and he will doubtless die some time, but it wouldn't surprise me to run across him again almost anywhere up and down the river, and if I do see him, the chances are that he will be playing cards. I have seen him, perhaps a dozen times in all, and that is what he has been doing each time. But somehow, I wouldn't care to be the man that stabbed him if he ever does get out of the hospital.'

SOURCES OF SILK.

Pugnacity of the Spiders and Voracity of the Worms That Spin It.

Almost every worm of aerial habits is more or less a silk worm. The caterpillars' nests so frequent in orchards and shrubberies are no more than big, unkempt and composite cocoons. Solitary creepers have the same power of silk production. In fact many of them emulate those gentlewomen, the spiders in letting themselves up or down, or roundabout with threads of their own spinning. These aerial roadways, indeed, fairly criss cross the summer air. They are invisible save when a glancing sunray strikes across them, notwithstanding their use is often made only too palpable by a big, hairy, wriggling something which slips down or along them to deposit itself upon an unsuspecting head or arm.

After the caterpillars come the genuine silk spinning spiders. These are distinguished from the common web spinners by the nature of their product. It is a true silk, strong, elastic, beautifully lustrous. It is produced, too, more abundantly in proportion to food than the regular worm filament. Stockings and mittens have been knitted of the spider silk. The only bar to its production in commercial quantities is the war like habits of the insects. Wherever three meet there is a battle royal which ends only with the death or disabling of all the fighters.

Down in Paraguay there is a spider which spins a brilliant yellow silk in such profusion the natives and the Spaniards collect it, and manufacture it, on rude native looms into shawls, ribbons, and short lengths for jackets. The color deepens and brightens with use, and is said to be inimitable—a glowing golden hue no dyer can produce.

The silk worm proper is an embodied appetite. He eats, eats, never fasting, never resting. He has been commercialized to such a degree that it is possible to estimate beforehand just how much silk he will turn out from a given weight of fresh mulberry leaves—to be exact, *Morus multicaulis*.

Italy and China furnish the best silk, hence the best silk worm eggs, though Japan is coming to be reckoned with in the matter of silk supply. This is due mainly to the fact that the special pains taking labor required in silk raising is cheaper in China than anywhere else. Chinese working women get daily wages of three cents. Everywhere it is women who do most of the work in rearing the worms. Men bring in the fresh leaves, and cultivate the trees which supply them but in the silkeries women watch over the worms, from the egg to the cocoon.

To keep the eggs dormant requires a temperature just above freezing. They must not be laid in the hatching trays without regard to the season. If it is cold and backward the hatch must be postponed to wait the growth of the leaves.

When first the worms hatch they are fed on leaves finely shredded, in bits suited to their tender jaws. After the first

moult the leaves are only torn. Thenceforward they are used whole, but must not be allowed to get hard and woody. They are stripped from the young shoots just before they reach full size. A tree that has given all its early leaves to the silk worm brood is so weakened that it may die. Consequently, trees are not fully stripped unless under great stress.

After the fifth moult the worms, fat, green, sluggish rolls, refuse to eat and begin moving their heads rapidly from side to side. This is the sign of cocoon spinning so the women supply the trays with bundles of clean, short twigs. Upon these the worms crawl, attach themselves and begin spinning. The cocoon is finished in twelve to twenty four hours. The goodness or badness of it is judged less by the size than the weight and symmetry.

A percentage of the finest cocoons are set apart to hatch out and produce next year's eggs. The rest are baked at a steady heat that destroys the chrysalid without injuring the silk, then boiled, doubled, reeled, scoured and sent to market.

There are tricks in the trade of silk spinning and that of silk dyeing. Thread can be loaded with metallic or earthy salts to weigh half as much again as the pure raw silk. But dealers are alert for such frauds and have tricks of their own to offset them.

A curious industry is the manufacture of silk worm gut for fishing tackle. The best of it comes from the Spanish silk fields. A silk worm ready to spin its cocoon has within a long, much convoluted intestine filled with pure fluid silk. The gut makers take such worms, snip off both ends, then deftly draw out the full intestine, straighten it, pass it through sundry chemical solutions to cleanse and strengthen it, and at last dry it and tie it in bunches.

The result is a filament several yards long, strong, fine, elastic and in water nearly invisible. This is the gut leader attached to the end of a braided line, to hold the hook.

Silk worm gut is also useful in surgery. It has possibly the greatest textile strength proportioned to size of any known ligature.

Chemistry has found out a way to do in tanks what the worm does in its stomach, that is, how to dissolve woody fibre into a clear, rosy liquid. This is spun by forcing it through innumerable tiny holes in a brass cylinder. Then the threads are chemically treated, washed, dried, hot pressed and variously tortured. The result is thread that looks and feels like raw silk but lacks the strength of true silk. It is used for wool, in many mills with real silk warp.

Millions in Alimony.

The amount disbursed for alimony in New York state is estimated at \$1,000,000 a month. There is no payment made by a payee which involves upon him so much personal pain as the disbursement of alimony. Various attempts have been made by the alimony payers to obtain relief from their burden, but the legislators and courts offer them very little hope.

There has been some talk recently of forming an organization of divorced husbands with a view to creating a lobby in Albany that will do something to nagigate alimony obligations. The husbands take the ground that the women who get alimony should be stimulated or encouraged by the state to learn some useful employment so that they may become self supporting instead of charges upon the income of unwilling ex-husbands.

'But the alimony-payers have thus far been thwarted,' says Lawyer E. M. Friend, who was invited to address a group of disgruntled ex-husbands recently. 'The legislature, perhaps, has not been properly approached. The grievance of the alimony-payers is in many cases well founded. They pay money to women who are very well provided for otherwise.'

The largest alimony on record, as awarded in a New York court, is \$2000 a month. The lowest is \$12 a month. In fixing the alimony the court is guided as much by the habits of life of the victim, as by his wealth. A man with \$100,000 a year who has been in the habit of spending it all would have to pay more to an ex wife than a man with the same income who had been in the habit of saving \$90,000 of it.

The only means by which the grand army of alimony payers can escape the payment of their million dollars a month appears to lie in a general escape from the state of New York. They might found a alimony colony in some other commonwealth. Just as soon as a man gets over the border line into Jersey, Connecticut or some other friendly place, alimony cannot be recovered from him. The pursuing sheriff cannot cross the frontier under any circumstances. There is no process by which New York alimony can be collected outside this jurisdiction.

'While there is alimony there's hope, for good lawyers and wives,' says Lawyer Friend. 'It does not seem as if the New York legislature is likely to receive favorably any proposition to abolish the alimony principle.'