

# The Bully of Brocas Court

By Sir Arthur Conan Doyle

That year—it was in 1878—the South Midland Yeomanry were out near Luton, and the real question which appealed to every man in the great camp was not how to prepare for a possible European war, but the far more vital one how to get a man who could stand up for ten rounds to Farrier-Sergeant Burton. Slogger Burton was a fine upstanding fourteen stone of bone and brawn, with a smack in either hand which would leave any ordinary mortal senseless. A match must be found for him somewhere or his head would outgrow his dragoon helmet. Therefore Sir Fred Milburn, better known as Mumbles, was dispatched to London to find if among the fancy there was no one who would make a journey in order to take down the number of the bold dragoon.

They were bad days, those, in the prize-ring. The old knuckle-fighting had died out in scandal and disgrace, smothered by the pestilent crowd of betting men and ruffians of all sorts who hung upon the edge of the movement and brought disgrace and ruin upon the decent fighting men, who were often humble heroes whose gallantry has never been surpassed. An honest sportsman who desired to see a fight was usually set upon by villains, against whom he had no redress, since he was himself engaged on what was technically an illegal action. He was stripped in the open Street, his purse taken, and his head split open if he ventured to resist. The ring-side could only be reached by men who were prepared to fight their way there with cudgels and hunting-crops. No wonder that the classic sport was attended now by those only who had nothing to lose.

On the other hand, the era of the reserved building and the legal glove-fight had not yet arisen, and the cult was in a strange intermediate condition. It was impossible to regulate it, and equally impossible to abolish it, since nothing appeals more directly and powerfully to the average Briton. Therefore there were scrambling contests in stableyards and barns, hurried visits to France, secret meetings at dawn in wild parts of the country, and all manner of evasions and experiments. The men themselves became as unsatisfactory as their surroundings. There could be no honest open contest, and the loudest bragger talked his way to the top of the list. Only across the Atlantic had the huge figure of John Lawrence Sullivan appeared, who was destined to be the last of the earlier system and the first of the later one.

Things being in this condition, the sporting Yeomanry Captain found it no easy matter among the boxing saloons and sporting pubs of London to find a man who could be relied upon to give a good account of the huge Famer-Sergeant. Heavy-weights were at a premium. Finally his choice fell upon Alf Stevens of Kentish Town, an excellent rising middle-weight who had never yet known defeat and had indeed some claims to the championship. His professional experience and craft would surely make up for the three stone of weight which separated him from the formidable dragoon. It was in this hope that Sir Fred Milburn engaged him, and proceeded to convey him in his dog-cart behind a pair of spanking greys to the camp of the Yeomen. They were to start one evening, drive up the Great North Road, sleep at St. Albans, and finish their journey next day.

The prize-fighter met the sporting Baronet at the Golden Cross, where Bates, the little groom, was standing at the head of the spirited horses. Stevens, a pale-faced, clean-cut young fellow, mounted beside his employer and waved his hand to a little knot of fighting men, rough, collarless, reefer-coated fellows who had gathered to bid their comrade good-bye. “Good luck,

Alf!” came in a hoarse chorus as the boy released the horses’ heads and sprang in behind, while the high dog-cart swung swiftly round the curve into Trafalgar Square.

Sir Frederick was so busy steering among the traffic in Oxford Street and the Edgware Road that he had little thought for anything else, but when he got into the edges of the country near Hendon, and the hedges had at last taken the place of that endless panorama of brick dwellings, he let his horses go easy with a loose rein while he turned his attention to the young man at his side. He had found him by correspondence and recommendation, so that he had some curiosity now in looking him over. Twilight was already falling and the light dim, but what the Baronet saw pleased him well. The man was a fighter every inch, clean-cut, deep-chested, with the long straight cheek and deep-set eye which goes with an obstinate courage. Above all, he was a man who had never yet met his master and was still upheld by the deep sustaining confidence which is never quite the same after a single defeat. The Baronet chuckled as he realized what a surprise packet was being carried north for the Farrier-Sergeant.

“I suppose you are in some sort of training, Stevens?” he remarked, turning to his companion.

“Yes, sir; I am fit to fight for my life.”

“So I should judge by the look of you.”

“I live regular all the time, sir, but I was matched against Mike Connor for this last week-end and scaled down to eleven four. Then he paid forfeit, and here I am at the top of my form.”

“That’s lucky. You’ll need it all against a man who has a pull of three stone and four inches.”

The young man smiled.

“I have given greater odds than that, sir.”

“I dare say. But he’s a game man as well.”

“Well, sir, one can but do one’s best.”

The Baronet liked the modest but assured tone of the young pugilist. Suddenly an amusing thought struck him, and he burst out laughing.

“By Jove!” he cried. “What a lark if the Bully is out to-night!”

Alf Stevens pricked up his ears.

“Who might he be, sir?”

“Well, that’s what the folk are asking. Some say they’ve seen him, and some say he’s a fairy-tale, but there’s good evidence that he is a real man with a pair of rare good fists that leave their marks behind him.”

“And where might he live?”

“On this very road. It’s between Finchley and Elstree, as I’ve heard. There are two chaps, and they come out on nights when the moon is at full and challenge the passers-by to fight in the old style. One fights and the other picks up. By George! the fellow *can* fight, too, by all accounts. Chaps have been found in the morning with their faces all cut to ribbons to show that the Bully had been at work upon them.”

Alf Stevens was full of interest.

“I’ve always wanted to try an old-style battle, sir, but it never chanced to come my way. I believe it would suit me better than the gloves.”

“Then you won’t refuse the Bully?”

“Refuse him! I’d go ten miles to meet him.”

“By George! it would be great!” cried the Baronet. “Well, the moon is at the full, and the place should be about here.”

“If he’s as good as you say,” Stevens remarked, “he should be known in the ring, unless he is just an amateur who amuses himself like that.”

“Some think he’s an ostler, or maybe a racing man from the training stables over yonder. Where there are horses there is boxing. If you can believe the accounts, there is something a bit queer and outlandish about the fellow. Hi! Look out, damn you, look out!”

The Baronet’s voice had risen to a sudden screech of surprise and of anger. At this point the road dips down into a hollow, heavily shaded by trees, so that at night it arches across like the mouth of a tunnel. At the foot of the slope there stand two great stone pillars, which, as viewed by daylight, are lichen-stained and weathered, with heraldic devices on each which are so mutilated by time that they are mere protuberances of stone. An iron gate of elegant design, hanging loosely upon rusted hinges, proclaims both the past glories and the present decay of Brocas Old Hall, which lies at the end of the weed-encumbered avenue. It was from the shadow of this ancient gateway that an active figure had sprung suddenly into the centre of the road and had, with great dexterity, held up the horses, who ramped and pawed as they forced back upon their haunches.

“Here, Rowe, you ’old the tits, will ye?” cried a high strident voice. “I’ve a little word to say to this ’ere slap-up Corinthian before ’e goes any farther.”

A second man had emerged from the shadows and without a word took hold of the horses’ heads. He was a short, thick fellow, dressed in a curious brown many-caped overcoat, which came to his knees, with gaiters and boots beneath it. He wore no hat, and those in the dog-cart had a view, as he came in front of the side-lamps, of a surly red face with an ill-fitting lower lip clean shaven, and a high black cravat swathed tightly under the chin. As he gripped the leathers his more active comrade sprang forward and rested a bony hand upon the side of the splashboard while he looked keenly up with a pair of fierce blue eyes at the faces of the two travellers, the light beating full upon his own features. He wore a hat low upon his brow, but in spite of its shadow both the Baronet and the pugilist could see enough to shrink from him, for it was an evil face, evil but very formidable, stern, craggy, high-nosed, and fierce, with an inexorable mouth which bespoke a nature which would neither ask for mercy nor grant it. As to his age, one could only say for certain that a man with such a face was young enough to have all his virility and old enough to have experienced all the wickedness of life. The cold, savage eyes took a deliberate survey, first of the Baronet and then of the young man beside him.

“Aye, Rowe, it’s a slap-up Corinthian, same as I said,” he remarked over his shoulder to his companion. “But this other is a likely chap. If ’e isn’t a millin’ cove ’e ought to be. Any’ow, we’ll try ’im out.”

“Look here,” said the Baronet, “I don’t know who you are, except that you are a damned impertinent fellow. I’d put the lash of my whip across your face for two pins!”

“Stow that gammon, gov’nor! It ain’t safe to speak to me like that.”

“I’ve heard of you and your ways!” cried the angry soldier. “I’ll teach you to stop my horses on the Queen’s high road! You’ve got the wrong men this time, my fine fellow, as you will soon learn.”

“That’s as it may be,” said the stranger. “May’ap, master, we may all learn something before we part. One or other of you ’as got to get down and put up your ’ands before you get any farther.”

Stevens had instantly sprung down into the road.

“If you want a fight you’ve come to the right shop,” said he; “it’s my trade, so don’t say I took you unawares.”

The stranger gave a cry of satisfaction.

“Blow my dickey!” he shouted. “It *is* a millin’ cove, Joe, same as I said. No more chaw-bacons for us, but the real thing. Well, young man, you’ve met your master to-night. Happen you never ’eard what Lord Longmore said o’ me? ‘A man must be made special to beat you,’ says ’e. That’s wot Lord Longmore said.”

“That was before the Bull came along,” growled the man in front, speaking for the first time.

“Stow your chaffing, Joe! A little more about the Bull and you and me will quarrel. ’E bested me once, but it’s all betters and no takers that I glut ’im if ever we meet again. Well, young man, what d’ye think of me?”

“I think you’ve got your share of cheek.”

“Cheek. Wot’s that?”

“Impudence, bluff—gas, if you like.”

The last word had a surprising effect upon the stranger. He smote his leg with his hand and broke out into a high neighing laugh, in which he was joined by his gruff companion.

“You’ve said the right word, my beauty,” cried the latter, “ ‘Gas’ is the word and no error. Well, there’s a good moon, but the clouds are comin’ up. We had best use the light while we can.”

Whilst this conversation had been going on the Baronet had been looking with an ever-growing amazement at the attire of the stranger. A good deal of it confirmed his belief that he was connected with some stables, though making every allowance for this his appearance was very eccentric and old-fashioned. Upon his head he wore a yellowish-white top-hat of long-haired beaver, such as is still affected by some drivers of four-in-hands, with a bell crown and a curling brim. His dress consisted of a shortwaisted swallow-tail coat, snuff-coloured, with steel buttons. It opened in front to show a vest of striped silk, while his legs were encased in buff knee-breeches with blue stockings and low shoes. The figure was angular and hard, with a great suggestion of wiry activity. This Bully of Brocas was clearly a very great character, and the young dragoon officer chuckled as he thought what a glorious story he would carry back to the mess of this queer old-world figure and the thrashing which he was about to receive from the famous London boxer.

Billy, the little groom, had taken charge of the horses, who were shivering and sweating.

“This way!” said the stout man, turning towards the gate. It was a sinister place, black and weird, with the crumbling pillars and the heavy arching trees. Neither the Baronet nor the pugilist liked the look of it.

“Where are you going, then?”

“This is no place for a fight,” said the stout man. “We’ve got as pretty a place as ever you saw inside the gate here. You couldn’t beat it on Molesey Hurst.”

“The road is good enough for me,” said Stevens.

“The road is good enough for two Johnny Raws,” said the man with the beaver hat. “It ain’t good enough for two slap-up millin’ coves like you an’ me. You ain’t afeard, are you?”

“Not of you or ten like you,” said Stevens, stoutly.

“Well, then, come with me and do it as it ought to be done.”

Sir Frederick and Stevens exchanged glances.

“I’m game,” said the pugilist.

“Come on, then.”

The little party of four passed through the gateway. Behind them in the darkness the horses stamped and reared, while the voice of the boy could be heard as he vainly tried to soothe them. After walking fifty yards up the grass-grown drive the guide turned to the right through a thick

belt of trees, and they came out upon a circular plot of grass, white and clear in the moonlight. It had a raised bank, and on the farther side was one of those little pillared stone summer-houses beloved by the early Georgians.

“What did I tell you?” cried the stout man, triumphantly. “Could you do better than this within twenty mile of town? It was made for it. Now, Tom, get to work upon him, and show us what you can do.”

It had all become like an extraordinary dream. The strange men, their odd dress, their queer speech, the moonlit circle of grass, and the pillared summer-house all wove themselves into one fantastic whole. It was only the sight of Alf Stevens’s ill-fitting tweed suit, and his homely English face surmounting it, which brought the Baronet back to the workaday world. The thin stranger had taken off his beaver hat, his swallow-tailed coat, his silk waistcoat, and finally his shirt had been drawn over his head by his second. Stevens in a cool and leisurely fashion kept pace with the preparations of his antagonist. Then the two fighting men turned upon each other.

But as they did so Stevens gave an exclamation of surprise and horror. The removal of the beaver hat had disclosed a horrible mutilation of the head of his antagonist. The whole upper forehead had fallen in, and there seemed to be a broad red weal between his close-cropped hair and his heavy brows.

“Good Lord,” cried the young pugilist. “What’s amiss with the man?”

The question seemed to rouse a cold fury in his antagonist.

“You look out for your own head, master,” said he. “You’ll find enough to do, I’m thinkin’, without talkin’ about mine.”

This retort drew a shout of hoarse laughter from his second. “Well said, my Tommy!” he cried. “It’s Lombard Street to a China orange on the one and only.”

The man whom he called Tom was standing with his hands up in the centre of the natural ring. He looked a big man in his clothes, but he seemed bigger in the buff, and his barrel chest, sloping shoulders, and loosely-slung muscular arms were all ideal for the game. His grim eyes gleamed fiercely beneath his misshapen brows, and his lips were set in a fixed hard smile, more menacing than a scowl. The pugilist confessed, as he approached him, that he had never seen a more formidable figure. But his bold heart rose to the fact that he had never yet found the man who could master him, and that it was hardly credible that he would appear as an old-fashioned stranger on a country road. Therefore, with an answering smile, he took up his position and raised his hands.

But what followed was entirely beyond his experience. The stranger fainted quickly with his left, and sent in a swinging hit with his right, so quick and hard that Stevens had barely time to avoid it and to counter with a short jab as his opponent rushed in upon him. Next instant the man’s bony arms were round him, and the pugilist was hurled into the air in a whirling cross-buttock, coming down with a heavy thud upon the grass. The stranger stood back and folded his arms while Stevens scrambled to his feet with a red flush of anger upon his cheeks.

“Look here,” he cried. “What sort of game is this?”

“We claim foul!” the Baronet shouted.

“Foul be damned! As clean a throw as ever I saw!” said the stout man. “What rules do you fight under?”

“Queensberry, of course.”

“I never heard of it. It’s London prize-ring with us.”

“Come on, then!” cried Stevens, furiously. “I can wrestle as well as another. You won’t get me napping again.”

Nor did he. The next time that the stranger rushed in Stevens caught him in as strong a grip, and after swinging and swaying they came down together in a dog-fall. Three times this occurred, and each time the stranger walked across to his friend and seated himself upon the grassy bank before he recommenced.

“What d’ye make of him?” the Baronet asked, in one of these pauses.

Stevens was bleeding from the ear, but otherwise showed no sign of damage.

“He knows a lot,” said the pugilist. “I don’t know where he learned it, but he’s had a deal of practice somewhere. He’s as strong as a lion and as hard as a board, for all his queer face.”

“Keep him at out-fighting. I think you are his master there.”

“I’m not so sure that I’m his master anywhere, but I’ll try my best.”

It was a desperate fight, and as round followed round it became clear, even to the amazed Baronet, that the middle-weight champion had met his match. The stranger had a clever draw and a rush which, with his springing hits, made him a most dangerous foe. His head and body seemed insensible to blows, and the horribly malignant smile never for one instant flickered from his lips. He hit very hard with fists like flints, and his blows whizzed up from every angle. He had one particularly deadly lead, an uppercut at the jaw, which again and again nearly came home, until at last it did actually fly past the guard and brought Stevens to the ground. The stout man gave a whoop of triumph.

“The whisker hit, by George! It’s a horse to a hen on my Tommy! Another like that, lad, and you have him beat.”

“I say, Stevens, this is going too far,” said the Baronet, as he supported his weary man. “What will the regiment say if I bring you up all knocked to pieces in a bye-battle! Shake hands with this fellow and give him best, or you’ll not be fit for your job.”

“Give him best? Not I!” cried Stevens, angrily. “I’ll knock that damned smile off his ugly mug before I’ve done.”

“What about the Sergeant?”

“I’d rather go back to London and never see the Sergeant than have my number taken down by this chap.”

“Well, ’ad enough?” his opponent asked, in a sneering voice, as he moved from his seat on the bank.

For answer young Stevens sprang forward and rushed at his man with all the strength that was left to him. By the fury of his onset he drove him back, and for a long minute had all the better of the exchanges. But this iron fighter seemed never to tire. His step was as quick and his blow as hard as ever when this long rally had ended. Stevens had eased up from pure exhaustion. But his opponent did not ease up. He came back on him with a shower of furious blows which beat down the weary guard of the pugilist. Alf Stevens was at the end of his strength and would in another instant have sunk to the ground but for a singular intervention.

It has been said that in their approach to the ring the party had passed through a grove of trees. Out of these there came a peculiar shrill cry, a cry of agony, which might be from a child or from some small woodland creature in distress. It was inarticulate, high-pitched, and inexpressibly melancholy. At the sound the stranger, who had knocked Stevens on to his knees, staggered back and looked round him with an expression of helpless horror upon his face. The smile had left his lips and there only remained the loose-lipped weakness of a man in the last extremity of terror.

“It’s after me again, mate!” he cried.

“Stick it out, Tom! You have him nearly beat! It can’t hurt you.”

“It can ’urt me! It will ’urt me!” screamed the fighting man. “My God! I can’t face it! Ah, I see it! I see it!”

With a scream of fear he turned and bounded off into the brushwood. His companion, swearing loudly, picked up the pile of clothes and darted after him, the dark shadows swallowing up their flying figures.

Stevens, half-senselessly, had staggered back and lay upon the grassy bank, his head pillowed upon the chest of the young Baronet, who was holding his flask of brandy to his lips. As they sat there they were both aware that the cries had become louder and shriller. Then from among the bushes there ran a small white terrier, nosing about as if following a trail and yelping most piteously. It squattered across the grassy sward, taking no notice of the two young men. Then it also vanished into the shadows. As it did so the two spectators sprang to their feet and ran as hard as they could tear for the gateway and the trap. Terror had seized them—a panic terror far above reason or control. Shivering and shaking, they threw themselves into the dog-cart, and it was not until the willing horses had put two good miles between that ill-omened hollow and themselves that they at last ventured to speak.

“Did you ever see such a dog?” asked the Baronet.

“No,” cried Stevens. “And, please God, I never may again.”

Late that night the two travellers broke their journey at the Swan Inn, near Harpenden Common. The landlord was an old acquaintance of the Baronet’s, and gladly joined him in a glass of port after supper. A famous old sport was Mr. Joe Homer, of the Swan, and he would talk by the hour of the legends of the ring, whether new or old. The name of Alf Stevens was well known to him, and he looked at him with the deepest interest.

“Why, sir, you have surely been fighting,” said he. “I hadn’t read of any engagement in the papers.”

“Enough said of that,” Stevens answered, in a surly voice.

“Well, no offence! I suppose”—his smiling face became suddenly very serious—“I suppose you didn’t, by chance, see anything of him they call the Bully of Brocas as you came north?”

“Well, what if we did?”

The landlord was tense with excitement.

“It was him that nearly killed Bob Meadows. It was at the very gate of Brocas Old Hall that he stopped him. Another man was with him. Bob was game to the marrow, but he was found hit to pieces on the lawn inside the gate where the summer-house stands.”

The Baronet nodded.

“Ah, you’ve been there!” cried the landlord.

“Well, we may as well make a clean breast of it,” said the Baronet, looking at Stevens. “We have been there, and we met the man you speak of—an ugly customer he is, too!”

“Tell me!” said the landlord, in a voice that sank to a whisper. “Is it true what Bob Meadows says, that the men are dressed like our grandfathers, and that the fighting man has his head all caved in?”

“Well, he was old-fashioned, certainly, and his head was the queerest ever I saw.”

“God in Heaven!” cried the landlord. “Do you know, sir, that Tom Hickman, the famous prize-fighter, together with his pal, Joe Rowe, a silversmith of the City, met his death at that very point in the year 1822, when he was drunk, and tried to drive on the wrong side of a wagon? Both were killed and the wheel of the wagon crushed in Hickman’s forehead.”

“Hickman! Hickman!” said the Baronet. “Not the gasman?”

“Yes, sir, they called him Gas. He won his fights with what they called the ‘whisker hit,’ and no one could stand against him until Neate—him that they called the Bristol Bull—brought him down.”

Stevens had risen from the table as white as cheese.

“Let’s get out of this, sir. I want fresh air. Let us get on our way.”

The landlord clapped him on the back.

“Cheer up, lad! You’ve held him off, anyhow, and that’s more than anyone else has ever done. Sit down and have another glass of wine, for if a man in England has earned it this night it is you. There’s many a debt you would pay if you gave the Gasman a welting, whether dead or alive. Do you know what he did in this very room?”

The two travellers looked round with startled eyes at the lofty room, stone-flagged and oak-panelled, with great open grate at the farther end.

“Yes, in this very room. I had it from old Squire Scotter, who was here that very night. It was the day when Shelton beat Josh Hudson out St. Albans way, and Gas had won a pocketful of money on the fight. He and his pal Rowe came in here upon their way, and he was mad-raging drunk. The folk fairly shrunk into the corners and under the tables, for he was stalkin’ round with the great kitchen poker in his hand, and there was murder behind the smile upon his face. He was like that when the drink was in him—cruel, reckless, and a terror to the world. Well, what think you that he did at last with the poker? There was a little dog, a terrier as I’ve heard, coiled up before the fire, for it was a bitter December night. The Gasman broke its back with one blow of the poker. Then he burst out laughin’, flung a curse or two at the folk that shrunk away from him, and so out to his high gig that was waiting outside. The next we heard was that he was carried down to Finchley with his head ground to a jelly by the wagon wheel. Yes, they do say the little dog with its bleeding skin and its broken back has been seen since then, crawlin’ and yelpin’ about Brocas Corner, as if it were bookin’ for the swine that killed it. So you see, Mr. Stevens, you were fightin’ for more than yourself when you put it across the Gasman.”

“Maybe so,” said the young prize-fighter, “but I want no more fights like that. The Farrier-Sergeant is good enough for me, sir, and if it is the same to you, we’ll take a railway train back to town.”