

THE BLACK MARE.

A Story of Punchestown Races.

CHAPTER XIII.

PUNCESTOWN.

(Continued.)

"Mat knows what he's doing," said Mr. Sullivan; "the boys has been forty years and more running horses at the Currah. May be they're keeping Shaneen to lead the Englishman over his legs; and why wouldn't he take the second money, or run for a place anyways?"

"An' who would the black mare be?" demanded her former owner. "Is it the likes of her y'd be coming in at the tail of the hunt, and the Captain ridin' and all? I wonder to hear you then, Mr. Sullivan."

"In my opinion the race has betwixt three," replied the great authority, looking wise and dropping his voice. "There's your own mare, Demie, that you sold the Captain; there's Leprauchan, the big chestnut they brought up here from Limerick; there's the English horse, St. George, they call him—that's been training all the time in Kilkenny. Wait till I tell ye. If he gets first over the big double, he'll take as much catching as a flea in a bould blanket, and when thim's all racing round together, why wouldn't little Shaneen come in and win on the post?"

Demie looked disconcerted, and flushed his punch at a gulp. He had not before taken so comprehensive a view of the general contest as affecting the chance of his favorite. Pushing back the tall hat he scratched his head and pondered. "I'd be thinkin' butt' r of it, an' the Captain wouldn't have changed the mare's name," said he. "What ailed him at 'Molly Bawn' that he'd go an' call the likes of such a baste as that Satanella? Hurry now, Mr. Sullivan, take another taste of punch, and come out of this. You and me'll go and see them saddle, annyways!"

Leaving the booth, therefore, with many "God save ye's" and greetings from acquaintances crowding in, they emerged on the course close to the Grand Stand, at a spot that commanded an excellent view of the final, and baffled a panorama of such scenery as, in the sportsman's eye, is unequalled by any part of the world.

The rain had cleared off. White fleecy clouds, drifting across the sky before a soft west wind, threw alternate lights and shadows over a wild expanse of country that stretched to the horizon, in range on range of undulating pastures, broken only by scattered copses, square patches of gorse, and an occasional gully, marking the course of some shallow stream from the distant uplands, coyly unrolling, as the mist that rested on their brows rolled heavily away. Far as sight could reach, the landscape was intersected by thick irregular lines, denoting those formidable fences, of which the nature was to be ascertained by inspecting the leaps that crossed the steeplechase-course. These were of a size to require great power and courage in the competing animals, while the width of the ditches from which the banks were thrown up necessitated that repetition of his effort, by which the Irish hunter gets safely over these difficulties much as a rearing horse jumps a gate. A very gallant horse might be led by the first two or three such obstacles in his stride, but the tax on his muscles would be too exhaustive for continuance, and not to "change," as it is called, on the top of the bank, when there is a ditch on each side, would be a certain downfall. With thirty such leaps and more, with a sufficient brook and a high stone wall, with four Irish miles of galloping before the judge's stand can be passed, while the running is from end to end by some thoroughbred flyer not intended to win, and with the best steeplechase horses in Great Britain to encounter, a conqueror at Punchestown may be said to win his laurels nobly—laurels in which, as in the wreath of many a two-legged hero, the shamrock is profusely intertwined.

"The boys has got about the big double as thick as paves," observed Mr. Sullivan, shading his eyes under his hat-brim while he scanned the course. "It's there the Englishman will renage, likely, an' if there's wan drops in there'll be forty of them tumblin' one above the other, like Brian O'Raff forty's pigs. Will the Captain keep steady now, and never lose her off till she marks with her eye the very sod she's after kickin' with her fut?"

"I'll go bad he will!" answered Demie. "The Captain he'll draw her back smooth an' easy on the snaffle, and when one's he lets her drive—Whooroo! Begorra! It's not the pole-barracks nor yet the County Gaol would hold her, av' she gets a fair offer! I tell ye that black mare,—Whist! will ye now? He's the quality comm' into the race, an' he's the quality comm' into the race."

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yet these wild untutored spirits acknowledged instinctively that qualities by which men govern well are kept the fresher and stronger for a kindly heart to sympathize with sport as with sorrow, for a manly courage that, in work or play, trouble or danger, loves always to be in front.

So the "more powers" to his Excellency were not only loud but hearty, while for her Excellency, it need hardly be said of these impulsive, chivalrous and susceptible natures, they simply went out of their senses, and yelled in a frenzy of admiration and delight.

Nevertheless the applause was by no means exhausted, and Miss Douglas taking her place in the ladies' stand, could not repress a thrill of triumph at the remark of a strapping Tipperary boy in the crowd, made quite loud enough to be overheard.

"See, now, Larry, av' ye was goin' coortin', wouldn't ye fling down your caubeen, and bid her stop on to't? I'll engage there's flowers growin' whorover she lays her fut."

To which Larry replied, wink, "Divil a ha'porth I'd go on for the coortin'—but just stay where I am!"

Our party from Cormac's Town formed no unimportant addition to the company that thronged the stand. Amongst those neither Norah Macormac nor Mrs. Lushington could complain they had less than their share of admiration, while St. Josephs observed, with mingled sentiments of triumph and apprehension, that a hundred male eyes were bent on Satanella, and as many female voices whispered, "But who is that tall girl with black hair? so handsome, and in such a peculiar style!"

A proud man, though, doubtless, was the General, walking after his young lady with her shawls, her glasses, her parasol. Choosing for her an advantageous position to view the race, obtaining for her a card of the running horses, and trying to look as if he studied it with the vaguest notion of what was likely to win.

A match had just come off between Mr. McDermott's Comether and Captain Conolly's Molly Maguire, of little interest to the general public, but creating no small excitement amongst friends and partisans of the respective owners. Molly Maguire had been bred at Naas—within a stone's throw as it were. Comether was the pride of that well-known western hunt, once so celebrated as "The Blazers." Each animal was ridden by a good sportsman and popular representative of its particular district. The little Galway horse made all the running, took his leaps like a deer, finished like a game-cock, but was beaten by the mare's superior stride in the last struggle home, through a storm of voices, by a length.

The crowd was in ecstasies. The gentle-folks applauded with far more enthusiasm than is customary at Bedford or Lincoln. A lovely Galway girl, with eyes of that wondrous blue only to be caught from the reflection of the Atlantic, expressed an inclination to kiss the plucky little animal that had lost, and blushed like a rose when a gallant cornet entreated he might be the bearer of that reward to the horse in its stable. The clouds had cleared off, the sun shone out. The booths emptied themselves into the course. A hungry roar went up from the betting-ring and everybody prepared for the great race of the day—"The United Service-handicap, for horses of all ages, bona fide the property of officers who have held Her Majesty's commission within the last ten years. Gentlemen riders. Kildare Hunt Course and rules."

Betting, alas! flourishes at every meeting, and even Punchestown is not exempt from the visits of a fraternity who, support racing, it may be, after a fashion, but whose room many an Irish gentleman, no doubt, considers preferable to their company. On the present occasion they made perhaps more noise than they did business; but amongst real lovers of the sport, from the high-bred beautifully-dressed ladies in the stand, down to lads taking charge of farmers' horses, and "raising a leg off them" behind the booths, speculation was rife, in French gloves and Irish poplins, as in sixpenny pieces and "dandies" of punch. Man and woman, each had a special fancy, shouted for it, believed in it, backed it through thick and thin.

The race had created a good deal of attention from the time it was first organized. It showed a heavy entry, the terms were fair, a large sum of money was added, public runners were heavily weighted, the nominations included many horses that had never been out before. In one way and another the United Service Handicap had grown into the great event of the meeting.

The best of friends must part. Demie could not resist the big double, taking up a position whence he might hurl himself at it, in imagination, with every horse that rose. Mr. Sullivan, more practical, occupied a familiar spot that commanded a view of the finish, and enabled him to test the merits of winner or loser by the stoutness with which each struggled home.

Neither had such good places as Miss Douglas and Miss Macormac. Norah knew the exact angle from which everything could best be seen. There, like an open-hearted

left Sir Giles. He's sitting the snaffle himself in Leprauchan's mouth this minute, and an awkward job he makes of it, by reason of gout in the fingers. Put your money on the chestnut, Miss Douglas," he continued. "He's the boy that can do it!"

While he spoke, Leprauchan, a great raking chestnut, with three white legs, came down the course like a steam-engine. No martingale that ever was buckled, even in the practiced hands now steering him, could bring his head to a proper angle, but though he went star-gazing along, he never made a mistake, possessed a marvellous stride, especially in deep ground, and, to use a familiar phrase, could "stay for a week." "He's the boy!" shouted his jockey, standing well up in his stirrups to cheer him for a preliminary canter through the crowd. "He's the boy!" repeated a dozen varying tones behind him, as flyer after flyer went shooting by—now this way, now that—carrying all the colors of the rainbow, and each looking like a winner, till succeeded by the next.

For a few minutes St. Josephs had been in earnest conversation with one of the "jackeens," who earlier in the day, might have been taking counsel of Mr. Sullivan.

"I've marked your card for you, Miss Douglas," said the General. "I've the best information from my friend here, and the winner ought to be one of these four—Loprauchan, Shaneen, St. George, or Satanella. The English horse for choice if he can keep on his legs."

"I must have a bet on Satanella," exclaimed Miss Douglas irrepressibly, whereat the General looked grave, and Norah gave her an approving pat on the hand. "Send somebody into the ring, General, to find out her price, and back her for ten pounds at events, if they can't do better, on my behalf."

"I'd like to share your wager," said Norah kindling.

"And so you shall, dear," replied Miss Douglas. "You and I, at any rate, want him to win, poor fellow; and good wishes will do him no harm."

"Here he comes!" replied Norah; and while she spoke, Satanella was seen trotting leisurely down the course, snorting, playing with her bit, and bending to acknowledge the caresses Daisy lavished on her beautiful neck with no sparing hand.

The mare looked as fine as a star. Trained to perfection, her skin shining like satin, her muscles salient, her ribs just visible, her action, though she trotted with rather a straight knee, stealthy, cat-like, as if she went upon wires.

It is the first quality of a rider to adapt himself easily to every movement of the animal he bestrides, but this excellence of horsemanship is much enhanced when the pair have completed their preparation together, and the man has acquired his condition, morning after morning, in training walks and gallops on the beast; This was Daisy's case. Satanella, to a sensitive mouth, added a peculiar and irritable temper. Another hand on her rein for an hour would undo the work of days. Nobody had therefore ridden her for weeks but himself, and when the two went down the course at Punchestown together, they seemed like some skillful piece of mechanism, through which one master-spring set all parts in motion at once.

"He's an illigant rider," groaned Mr. Sullivan, who stood to win on Leprauchan. "An' a give-and-take horseman's 't the pick of the world when there's a legs. But it's not likely now they'd all stand up in such a 'rookawn,'" he added, "an' why wouldn't the Captain get throw'd down with the rest?"

Such admiration was excited by the black mare's appearance, particularly when she broke into a gallop, and Daisy with pardonable coxombry, turned in his saddle to salute the ladies smiling on him from the Stand, that few but those immediately interested noticed a little shabby, wiry-looking horse come stealing behind the crack with that smooth, easy swing which racing men, though they know it so thoroughly, will sometimes neglect to their cost.

This unassuming little animal carried a plain snaffle in his mouth, without even a restraining nose-band. It seemed quiet as a sheep, and docile as a dog. There was nothing remarkable about it to those who cannot take a horse in at a glance, but one of the 'oushold left his Excellency's Stand and descended into the Ring with a smile on his handsome, quiet face. When he returned the smile was still there, and he observed he had "backed Shaneen for a pony, and had got four to one."

Mr. Sullivan, too, as he marked the little animal increase its stride, while its quick, vibrating ears caught the tootfall of a horse galloping behind it, drew his mouth into many queer shapes suggestive of discomfiture imparting to himself in a whisper, "that if he rightly knowed it, may-be Sir Giles wasn't too free with his offer at all, for such a shabby little garron as that!"

So the cracks came sweeping by in quick succession, St. George, perhaps, attracting

couldn't if he tried. They started him to make running for St. George."

"What a pretty sight!" exclaimed the ladies, as something like a score of horses, ridden by the finest horsemen in the world, stood marshalled before the Stand. Though the majority were more sedate in their demeanor than might have been expected, three or four showed a great deal of temper and anxiety to get somewhere. Amongst these Satanella made herself extremely conspicuous for insubordination, contrasting strikingly with little Shaneen, who stood stock-still, playing with his bit, through two false starts, till the flag was fairly down, when he darted away like a rabbit, without pulling an ounce. Win or lose, his jockey was sure of a pleasant ride on Shaneen.

"They're really off!" said the General getting his glasses out, as a young officer, extricating himself from the betting ring, announced, breathlessly—

"They've made the mare first favorite, and are laying three to two!"

"What's that in front?" said everybody.

"Fandango! Well, they are going a cracker. Fancy jumping at such a pace as that!" Yet not a mistake was made at the first fence. To lookers-on from the Stand, all the horses seemed to charge it abreast, as their tails went up simultaneously, while they kicked the bank like lightning, and darted off again faster than before, but turning a little to the right, though the ground sloped in their favor, half-a-dozen were seen lengthening out in front of the rest, and it seemed as if the pace was already beginning to tell.

"Fandango still leading," said the General, scanning the race through his glasses, and thinking aloud as people always do on such occasions. "St. George and Satanella close behind, and—yes—by Jove it is! the little mud-colored horse, Shaneen, lying fourth. Over you go! Ah, one down—two—another? I fear that poor fellow's hurt! Look at the loose horse galloping on with them! Well done! They're all over the brook! St. George's second! What a fine goer he is! And now they're coming to the Big Double!"

But the Big Double is so far from the Stand that we will place ourselves by the Roscommon farmer on a knoll that commands it, and watch with him the gallant sight offered by such a field of horses charging a fence like the side of a house at racing pace.

"Augh, Captain! keep steady now, for the love of the Virgin!" roared Denis, as if Daisy, a quarter of a mile off, and going like the wind, could possibly hear him. "More power to the little horse! He's leadin' them yet! Nivir say it! The Englishman has the fat of him! Ah, catch houl't of his head, ye omadawn! He'll never see to change av' you're loosin' him off that way! Now, let the mare at it, Captain! She's doin' beautiful! An' little Shaneen on her quarters! It's keepin' time, he is, like a fiddler! Ah, be aisy, you in scarlet! By the mortal, there's a lep for ye! Whooroo!!! Did ever man see the like of that?"

It was indeed a heavy and hideous fall. St. George—whose education in the country of his adoption had been systematically carried out—could change his footing with perfect security on the narrowest bank that was ever thrown up with a spade. To the astonishment of his own and every other jockey in the race, his "on and off" at all the preceding fences had been quick and well-timed as that of Shaneen himself; but his blood got up when he had taken the brook in his stride. He could pull hard on occasion. Ten lengths from the Big Double he was out of his rider's hand, and going as fast as he could drive. Therefore Denis desired that gentleman to "catch houl't;" but with all his skill—for never was man less "on omadawn" in the saddle—his horse had broke away, and was doing with him what it liked.

Seeing the enormous size of the obstacle before him, St. George put on a yet more infuriated rush, and with a marvellous spring, that is talked off to this day, cleared the whole thing—broad-topped bank, double ditches, and all—in his stride, covering nearly eleven yards, by an effort that carried him fairly over from field to field; nothing but consummate horsemanship in his jockey—a fact that detects the exact moment when it is destruction to interfere—enabled the animal to perform so extraordinary a feat. But, alas! where he landed the surface was poached and trodden. His next stride brought him on his head; the succeeding one rolled him over with a broken thigh, and the gallant, generous, high-couraged St. George never rose again!

The appearance of the race was now considerably altered. Fandango dropped into the rear at once—there was nothing more for him to do in the absence of his stable-companion, and indeed he had shot his bolt ere half the distance was accomplished. The pace decreased slightly after the accident to St. George, and as they bounded over the wall, nearly together, not a man on the course doubted but that the contest lay between the first three, Satanella, Leprauchan, and Shaneen. Of these, the mare, so far as could be judged by spectators in the stand

But his whip was up when they made their turn for the run-in, and he landed over his last fence with a scramble that lost him at least a length.

"Leprauchan's beat!" shouted the crowd. "Satanella wins! It's all over—it's a moral. The mare for a million! The mare! The mare!"

Blanche Douglas turned pale as death, and Norah Macormac began to cry.

Satanella was approaching the distance with Leprauchan bent off, and Shaneen a length behind.

Here occurred one of those casualties which no amount of care avails to prevent, nor of caution to foresee.

The crowd in their eagerness had swayed in on the course. A woman carrying a child lost her footing, and fell helpless, directly in front of the black mare.

Daisy managed to avoid them, with a wrench at the bridle that saved their lives, and lost him some twenty feet of ground. In the next three strides, Shaneen's brown muzzle was at his quarters—at his knee—at his breastplate.

Never before had Satanella felt whip or spur. These were applied to some purpose, and gamely she answered the call; nevertheless, that shabby little horse drew on her, inch by inch.

They were neck and neck now, Shaneen's jockey sitting in the middle of his saddle, perfectly still.

"It's a race!" shouted the lookers-on. "The little 'un's coming up! He's gaining on her. Not a bit of it! The mare has him safe. Keep at her Daisy! Now, Satanella! Now, Shaneen! Did ever ye see such a fight? Neck and neck—head and head. By the powers, it's a dead heat!"

But the judge gave it to Shaneen by a neck, and when the numbers went up, then, Daisy and Daisy's backers knew that Satanella had taken the second place.

Leprauchan and the rest came lobbing in by two and threes. Nobody cared for them. Nobody had attention to spare for anything but the shabby little brown horse that had beaten the favorite.

CHAPTER XIV.

"A GOOD THING."

Poor Daisy! Everybody was sorry for him, everybody except the owner and a few friends who won largely on Shaneen, regretted his disappointment, and shrugged their shoulders at the heavy losses it was known to have entailed. His brother-officers looked grave, but bestirred themselves, nevertheless, for the next race. His trainer shook his head, glancing wistfully at the spur marks on the mare's reeking sides. The very crowd consoled with him, for he had ridden to admiration, and the accident that discomfited him was patent to all. Even Mr. Sullivan whose own hopes had been blighted by the defeat of the chestnut, expressed an opinion that "Av' it could be run again, though there wasn't a pound between them, it was his belief the mare would win!"

Mr. Walters, however, true to his nature, kept a bold face over a troubled heart, yet had a difficult task to control his feelings, when he emerged from the enclosure after weighing, and found his hand seized by the Roscommon farmer in a grip that inflicted no slight physical pain.

"Ah! now Captain," exclaimed Denis, who had flung himself on a horse, and galloped back from the Big Double, just too late to witness the finish. "Sure ye rode it beautiful! An' the mare, I seen her myself, come out from the all in wan blaze, like a sky-rocket! Bate, says they, by a neck? I'll never believe it! Annyways, ye'll need to pay the wagers. See, now, Captain, I parted a score o' heifers, only last Friday was it, by good luck, an' I've got the money here—rue Dublin notes—inside my coat-tail pocket. Take as much as ye'd be likely to want, Captain. What's a trifle like that betwixt you an' me? Oh! the mare would have wan safe enough, av' she had fair play. See to her now, she's got her wind back. Begorra! She's ready to go again!"

Daisy was no creature of impulse,—the last man in the world to be fooled by any sentiment of the moment,—yet tears filled his eyes, and he could scarce find a voice to thank his Lumble friend, while he declined an offer that came straight from the farmer's warm and generous heart.

Denis looked disappointed, wrung the Captain's hand hard, and vanished in a convenient booth to console himself with another "dandy" of punch.

Patting the mare fondly, and even laying his cheek against her warm, wet neck, the losing jockey retired to change silk and do-skin for his usual dress, in which, with his usual easy manner, he swaggered up to the stand. Here, as has been said, his defeat excited considerable sympathy, and, indeed, in one quarter, positive consternation. Two young ladies had accompanied him through the race, with their hearts as with their eyes. When his efforts ended in defeat, both were