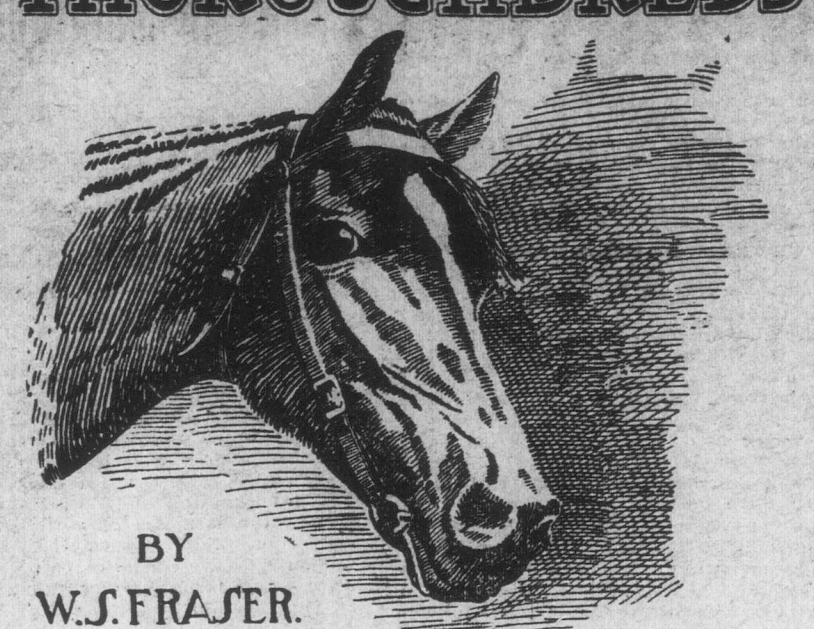


THOROUGHBREDS



BY
W.S. FRASER.

CHAPTER XXXIV. (Continued.)

"I guess we're here," said his companion, "perhaps I'll see you on de course. If you make a break to-day, play Larcen; he'll win. Say, I didn't catch your name."

"Mortimer."

"Well take care of yourself, Mr. Mortimer. See you later."

In his ignorance of a race meet Mortimer had felt sure he would be able to find Alan Porter without trouble. The true difficulty of his quest soon dawned upon him. Wedged into the pushing, shoving, hurrying crowd, in three minutes he had completely lost himself. A dozen times he rearranged his bearings, taking a certain flight of stairs leading up to the grand stand as the base of his peregrinations; a dozen times he returned to this point, having accomplished nothing but complete bewilderment.

He asked questions, but the men he addressed were too busy to bother with him; some did not hear, others stared at him in distrust, and many tendered flippant remarks, such as, "Ask a policeman." "You'll find him in the bar." "He's gone to Europe."

Even Mortimer's unpractised mind realized speedily that it would be nothing short of a miracle if he were to find anyone in all those impatient thousands who even knew the person he was seeking. One young man he spoke to declared that he knew Alan Porter quite well; he was a great friend of his; he'd find him in a minute. This obliging stranger's quest led them into the long race track bar room, which somehow or other suggested to Mortimer a cattle shambles.

Behind the bar young men in white coats, even some in their shirt sleeves, were setting forth on its top with feverish haste, clinking glasses that foamed and fretted much like the thirsty souls who called vociferously for liquid refreshment. Every now and then a fire-burnt lip by the throat of a consuming fever, the fever of speculation.

Mortimer's new friend suggested that they indulge in a beer while waiting for the sought-for appearance, and was so confidential he assured his quarry that he had a lead pipe clinch for the next race—it couldn't lose. The trainer was a bosom friend of his; a sort of hybrid brother in friendship. He himself was no tipster, he was an owner; he even went the length of flashing a bright yellow badge, as occult evidence of his standing.

These matters did not interest the searcher in the slightest; they only wasted his precious time. If he did not find Alan Porter soon the stolen money would be lost, he felt sure. "I must find my friend," he said, cutting the gaudy man short. "Excuse me, I'll go and look for him."

But the other was insistent; ferretlike, he had unearthed good meat—a rare green one and he felt indisposed to let his prey escape. His insinuation matured into insolence as Mortimer spoke somewhat sharply to him. Ignorant of racing as the latter was, he was hardly a man to take liberties with one he recognized the infringement.

The enormity of his mission and the possibility that it might be frustrated by his underestimation, made him savage. Raised to quick fury by a vicious remark about a tout who held him in leash, he suddenly stretched out a strong hand, and, seizing his insulter by the collar, gave him a quick twist that laid him on his back. Mortimer held him there for a full minute, while men gathered so close in that the became stifling.

Presently a heavy hand was laid on Mortimer's shoulder and a gruff policeman's voice asked, "What's the matter here?"

"Nothing much," Mortimer replied, releasing his hold and straightening up; "this backguard wanted me to bet on some horse, and when I refused, he insulted me; that's all."

The other man had risen, his face purple from the twist at the throat. The officer looked at him.

"At it again, Mr. Bunco. I'll take care of him," he continued, turning to Mortimer. "He's a tout. Out you go, this to the other man. Then, tickled in the ribs by the end of the policeman's baton, the tout was driven from the enclosure, and Mortimer merged into a larger crowd, and Mortimer was left once more to pursue his fruitless search.

As he emerged into the open of the lawn he saw a gentleman standing somewhat listlessly, self-absorbed, as though he were not a party to the incessant turmoil of the others, who were as men mad.

With a faith born of limited experience, Mortimer risked another hazard. He would ask his complacent one for guidance. What he had to do justified all chances of rebuff. "Pardon me, sir," he began, "I'm looking for a young friend of mine whose name is Alan Porter. Where would I be likely to find him?"

"If he's an owner, he'll probably be in the paddock," replied the composed one.

"Could you tell me where the paddock is?"

"To the right," and sweeping his arm in that direction the stranger sank back into his inner consciousness.

and blinked his eyes languidly, as though the unusual exertion of answering his inquirer's questions had decidedly bored him.

"That man is one in a thousand; yes, forty thousand, for he is a stranger to excitement," Mortimer said to himself as he strode rapidly across the grass to a gate which opened in the direction the other had indicated. His eagerness had almost carried him through the gate when a strong arm thrown across his chest, none too gently, barred his further progress.

"Show your badge, please," cried the voice.

Mortimer exposed the pasteboard he had acquired with the rapidity of the stand. "You can't pass in here," said the guard; "that's only good for the stand."

"But," began Mortimer. "Stand aside—make room, please!" from the gatekeeper, cut short his conversation.

Others were waiting to pass through. In despair he gave up his untenable place, and once more he was swallowed into the maelstrom of humanity that eddied about the stand enclosure.

As he was heading for his rock of locality, the straggler, hurrying somewhat recklessly, he ran with disturbing violence full tilt into a man who had erratically turned to his left, when according to all laws of the road should have been straight on.

"I beg your pardon," began Mortimer, then stared in blank amazement, cutting short his apology. The victim of his assault was Mr. Crane. The latter's loselid eyes had rounded open perceptibly in a look of surprise.

"Mr. Mortimer," he exclaimed, "You here? May I ask who's running the bank?"

Anxious about the stolen money, the sudden advent of Crane on his immediate horizon threw the young man into momentary confusion.

"My mother was ill—I got leave—I had to see Alan Porter—I've come here to find him. They'll manage all right at the bank without me."

He freed his volley of explanation at his companion with the rapidity of a Maxim gun. Truth and what he considered excusable falsehood came forth with equal volubility. Crane, somewhat mollified, and feeling that at first he had spoken rather sharply, became more gracious. At sight of Mortimer he had concluded that it was to see Alan Porter, and he had come, perhaps at her instigation.

"You've seen Alan Porter, sir?" Mortimer asked, anxiously.

"I did, but that was about an hour ago. You will probably find him—he was going to say—in the paddock with his sister, but for reasons he refrained from saying, he was likely sitting up in the grand stand."

As Mortimer stood scanning the sea of faces that rose wave on wave above him, Mr. Crane said, "I hope you found your mother better. If I see Alan Porter, I'll tell him you are looking for him."

When Mortimer turned around Crane had gone. He had meant to ask about the race Porter's horse Lauzanne was in, but he hesitated for fear he should say something which might give rise to a suspicion of his errand. He heard the rolling thunder of hoof beats in the air. From where he stood, over the heads of the many people he could see gaudy colored silk jackets coming swiftly up the broad straight boulevard of the race course; even as he looked they passed by with a peculiar bobbing up-and-down motion. The effect was grotesque, for he could not see the horses, could not see the motive power which carried the brightly-colored riders at such a terrific pace, that it might be the Derby.

"What race is that?" he asked of one who stood at his elbow.

The man's face wore a sullen, discontented look, and no wonder, for he had, with misplaced confidence, wagered many dollars on a horse that was even then prancing gaily in many yards behind the winner.

"Do you know what race that was?" Mortimer repeated, thinking the silent one had not heard him.

"Why don't you look at your race card?" retorted the jaundiced loser, transporting himself and his troubles to the haven of liquid consolation.

Mortimer an inspiration. He looked about and saw many men consulting small paper pamphlets; they were like people in an art gallery, catalogue in hand.

By chance, Mortimer observed a young man selling these race catalogues, as he innocently named them. He procured one, and the seller in answer to a question told him that it was the third race he had just seen, and the next would be the Brooklyn Derby.

There it was, all set forth in the programme he had just purchased. Seven horses to start, all with names unfamiliar except The Dutchman and Lauzanne. He had almost given up looking for Alan; it seemed so hopeless. At any rate he had tried his best to save the boy's honor, and he had done it. Now it was pretty much in the hands of fate. He remembered what Alan had said about The Dutchman's certain chances of winning the coming race. He "To the right," and sweeping his arm in that direction the stranger sank back into his inner consciousness.

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boy get the money to cover up his thefts, was green with envy.

It had seemed to Mortimer a foolish, desperate thing to risk money on anything so uncertain as a horse race; but here was at stake the honor of a bright, splendid young man, never so happy as his parents, which the poor, deluded boy had wagered on one horse chance of winning against six others. It was terrible. Mortimer shuddered, and closed his eyes, but he thought of the misery, the shame, that would come to Allan and his mother when they knew, as they must, if Crane's horse were beaten, that the son was a thief. Oh, God! why couldn't he find the boy and save him before it was too late? Probably Alan had already betted the money; but even if that were so, he had vain visions of forcing the man who had received the stolen money to disgorge. No one had a right to receive stolen money; and if necessary, Mortimer would give him to understand that he was making himself a party to the crime.

But the mere fact that he couldn't find Alan Porter rendered him as helpless as a babe; he might as well have remained in the bank that day. How willingly he would have hastened back and replaced the money if he but had it. For Allan's sake he would have bargained himself, would have sacrificed a hundred times that sum to save her from the unutterable misery that was to come if her brother was denounced as a felon.

He was aroused from his despondent train of thought by speech that struck with a familiar jar upon his ears. It was Mortimer's voice, the voice he had descended on the pleasures of betting during their journey from New York.

"What d'ye t'ink of it, pard?" was the following close on Old Bill's heels. Mortimer stammered the weak information that he didn't know what to think of it.

"Dere ain't no files on us to-day—I'm nookin' 'em out in great shape. Can't pick a loser, indeed, I've lined up for a cash-in three times, I'll make it four straight, sure. Larcen'll come home all alone; you see if he don't."

"I hope so," rejoined Mortimer. "I say, Mister Horton, put down a bet on him—he's good business; put a 'V' on, an' rake down fifty—dat'll pay your ex's. De talent's gone for De Dutchman, but do make no mistake about the other, he'll win."

In an instant the young man knew why his persistent worrier of a tortured spirit had been sent him. Fate gave him a cue; it whispered in his ear, "Put down a hundred—you have it—and win a thousand; then you can save Alan Porter—can keep this misery from the girl that is to you as your own life."

Mortimer listened eagerly; to the blabber at his side; to the whisper in his ear; to himself, that spoke within himself. Even if it were not all true, if Lauzanne were beaten, what of it? He would lose a hundred dollars, but that would not ruin him; it would cause him to save and pinch a little, but he was accustomed to self-denial.

"Will the betting men take a hundred dollars from me on this horse Lauzanne?" he asked, a minute ago seeking pause, during which these thoughts had flashed through his mind.

"Will dey take a hundred? Will dey take a thousand? Say, what you givin' me?"

"If Lauzanne won, I'd win a thousand, and would I?"

"If you put it down straight; but you might play safe—split de hundred, fifty each way, win an' show; Larcen'll be sure to take 't, 't's sure."

"I want to win a thousand," declared Mortimer.

"Den you've got to plump fer a win; he's ten to one."

He took a deep breath, and he understood himself; he was falling in with the betting idea. It was an age since he stood at his desk in that bank, abhorrent of all gambling methods, to the present moment when he was actually drawing from his pocket a roll of bills with which to bet on a horse.

He took a disparing look through the thicket of human beings that made a living forest all about, in a last despairing look at his pocket. He saw three pieces away a uniquely familiar figure was treading in and out the changing maze—it was Mike Gaynor.

Mortimer broke from his friend, and with quick steps reached the trainer's side.

"I want to find Alan Porter," he said, in answer to Gaynor's surprised salutation.

"He was in the paddock a bit ago," answered Mike; "he might be there still."

Almost involuntarily Mortimer, as he talked, had edged back toward his friend of disconsolate raggedness.

"I want to go in there—I'd like to go now to find him, but they won't let me through the gate."

"No more they will," answered Mike, with untruthful readiness, for all at once it occurred to him that if Mortimer got to the paddock he might run up against Allan and recognize her.

"De gate could buy a badge and get in," volunteered Old Bill.

The lid of Mike's right eye drooped to the side of a lantern, as he answered; "He couldn't get wan now—it's too late; just wait y'ere, sir, and if the b'y's there wit' the nags, I'll find him out."

Old Bill made no comment upon Mike's diplomatic misstatement anent the badge, for he had observed the wink, and held true to the masonry which exists between race-course regulars.

"Yes, please send him out then, Mr. Gaynor; it's important."

"I'm in a hurry meself," said Mike, "I just come out fer a minute; see here, an' he nodded his head assent to Mike's words. The latter walked by his side for a few steps.

"Who's that guy?" asked the Trainer.

"I don't know; he calls himself Old Bill."

"Well, ye best look out—he looks purty tough. What's he playin' y' fer?"

"He advised me to bet money on Lauzanne."

"The devil he did! What th' yellow moon does he know about the Chestnut; did y' back him?"

"No, ye ain't."

"Are you back to?"

"I don't know. Do you think Lauzanne might come in first?"

A slight smile relaxed the habitually dark muscles of Mike's grim visage; and dollars; if not, where would the

body talk of a horse "coming in first," he was indeed a great bettor. This young man of the counting house, what was he doing there betting at all, Mike wondered. It must be because of his interest in the girl, his reason an unguessed stable money.

"I t'ink he'll win if he does his best for her."

"Does his best for who?"

Mike got to cover; his ungoverned tongue was always playing him tricks. "Miss Allan is managin' the horse," he explained, very deliberately, "an' there's a new b'y up on Lauzanne's back, d'ye understand; an' if the fates don't suit her, he's the best for the young mistress that'll be watchin' him here in the stand wit' tears in her eyes, he moight win—d'ye understand?"

Yes, Mortimer understood; it seemed long ago when he was playing him tricks. The other fellow was on the lawn, pains to cover up the slip he had made.

"Now I must go," he continued; "an' ye needn't come in the paddock—if the b'y is there, I'll find him out."

When Alan's seeker returned to Old Bill, the latter said, "He t'inks your choice might come in first."

"Why was Irish steerin' y' clear of the paddock?" asked the other.

"I suppose it was to save me the expense of buying a ticket for it."

The other said nothing further, but the remembrance of Mike's wink convinced him that this was not the sole reason.

They waited for young Porter's appearance. The love that was in Mike's gezer yer waitin' fer is not in dere or he'd showed up," said Old Bill; "an' if yer goin' to take a tip, we'd better skip to de ring an' see what's doin'."

It was Mortimer who took the stock exchange in New York. He could not help but think how like unto it was the betting ring with its horse of pushing, struggling, humans, as he worried away, in the following close on Old Bill's heels.

There was a sort of mechanical aptness in his leader's way of displacing men in his path. Mortimer realized that but for his guide he never would have penetrated beyond the outer shell of the buzzing hive. Even then he hoped that he might, by the direction of chance, see Alan Porter. This issue at stake, and the prospect of its solution through his unwonted betting endeavor, were pushing him on with a will.

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his practiced eye told him they were not plungers, more of the class that usually bet ten dollars at the outside; they were evidently betting on information; two one-hundred-dollar bets coming together on Lauzanne probably meant a stable money.

"Let's get out, mister," cried Old Bill, clutching Mortimer's arm.

"Don't I get anything—a receipt, or so?"

Faust heard this and laughed derisively. "You won't need nothin' to show for this money," he said.

"We'll be roun' at de back in a few minutes fer a couple of 'ou," retorted Old Bill. "Let's cut 'rough here," he added to his companion, making a passage between the bookmakers.

Bill's knowledge of the local geography was good, and skirting the crowd they were soon out on the lawn. "Let's watch de parade," Mortimer's adjutant suggested, and he led the way down to the course, where they stood against the rail, waiting.

CHAPTER XXXV.

During this time there was a bustle of much interest in the paddock. Allan, ready dressed in the Porter colors, had been driven to the course half an hour before the time set for the Derby. Her face was as though she had ridden steadily backed down to the position of equal favorite with White Moth.

At last there was the summons to saddle, and Lauzanne was brought into the stall by Dixon. Then the door was shrouded by an ever-changing semicircle of spectators. Allan gave a little start and turned her head away as Crane, pushing through the others, stood just inside the stall and spoke to Dixon.

"Your horse looks very well; I hope you win, if I don't."

"He's as good as we could make him," answered the Trainer, as he adjusted the weight cloth.

"Is Miss Porter here?" were Crane's next words, quite in a tone of a casual inquiry.

"She may be in the stand," Dixon answered, without turning his head. Mike had deliberately interposed his body between Allan and the doorway. To the girl's relief, without any further comment, Crane quickly moved away.

"Excuse me, Al, fer standin' in front av y'," said Mike, "but these outsiders is enough to make a b'y nervous the way they stare at him. Alan Porter ain't stable at home, an' he's a weak in'er his sister, but I hustled him out, tellin' him ye—I mean she—was in the stand."

"Thank you, Mike; you're a good fellow," replied the girl gratefully.

Dixon had never taken so much care over the preparation of a horse for a race in all his life; and at last everything was as perfect as it possibly could be made. Lauzanne's behavior also, to become the gray velvet of his in'er his sister, but I hustled him out, tellin' him ye—I mean she—was in the stand."

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