

BY HAWLEY SMART.

Author of "Breezie Langton," "At Fault," "Tie and Trick," "Long Odds," "Without Love or Licence," &c., &c.

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CHAPTER I.—THE WALKING MATCH.



BRIGHT sun and a nor'easter, such as usually characterize the merry month of May. A white, straight, dusty road, along which a man with his loins girt up and stripped to his shirt and trousers, is walking rapidly and doggedly. He is followed by a little knot of people apparently interested in his proceedings, one of whom, walking by his side, continually consults his watch; indeed, the whole party seem extremely anxious as regards the time. The man, stripped of his coat, looks worn, travel-stained, and bears signs of weariness. If he is walking fast, there can also be little doubt from the set, defiant expression in his face that he is walking in no little difficulty. From time to time he throws a mute glance at his companion, who usually responds with much the same formula:

"Never fear, old boy—you'll do it all right; all you have got to do is to keep on walking and think of nothing else. I'm doing the *thinking* for you. You have got a mile to do every fourteen minutes, and you will just win clever!"

When Hugh Fleming three evenings ago backed himself to walk fifty miles in twelve hours, without training, the whole mess-table laughed. The brother officer who had laid two to one against his doing it, good-naturedly offered to scratch the bet any time during the evening. It seemed perfectly absurd that Fleming should perform any such feat as this. A man who had shown so far not the slightest taste for athletics—who rarely played cricket, never played racquets, and with the exception of an occasional country walk, for the most part took his exercise round a billiard-table. He had never been known to walk a match, and when this one was made, said that he had never done such a thing before. His comrades all laughed at him, and with that candour which close intimacy confers, bade him, "Not make a fool of himself, but cry off his bet before it was too late."

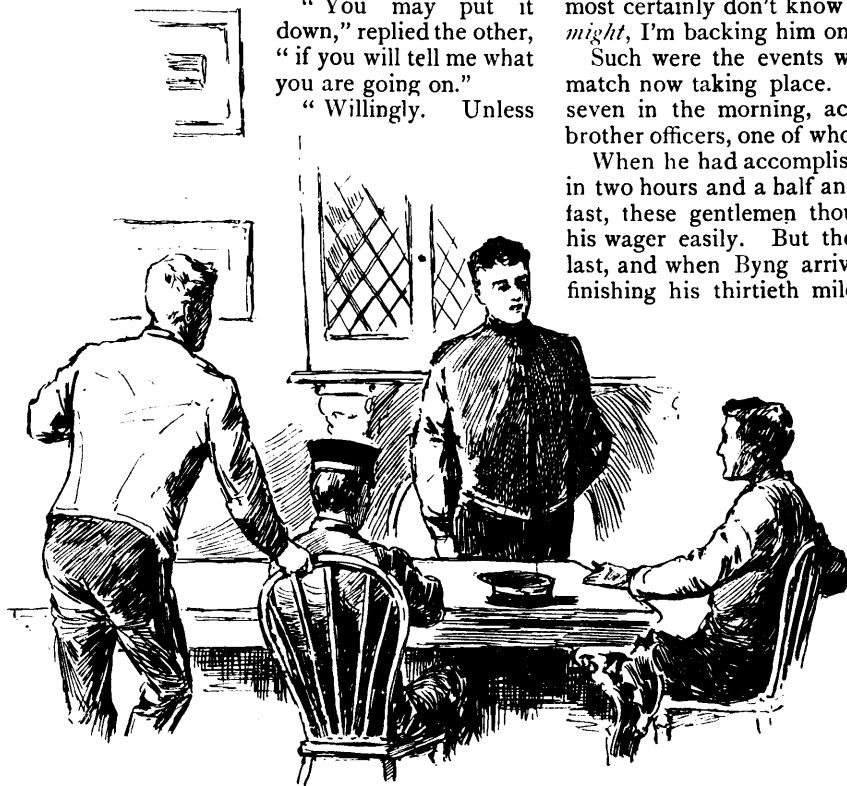
There was one exception to the popular feeling—there invariably is—and this was Tom Byng, Fleming's most intimate friend. Byng maintained a rigid silence as to what he thought of the affair, and even when appealed to declined to express any opinion thereon. He was a man who was rather an authority amongst his fellows on all matters of sport, whether with rod or with gun, whether on the race-course or on the cinder-track, and his brother officers were not a little anxious to ascertain what he might think of this foolish wager. But, no, neither at the dinner-table nor in the ante-room afterwards could he be induced to express his views. Until Fleming had retired for the night he smoked silently, and in answer to all inquiries as to what he thought of the match,

merely shrugged his shoulders and replied, "I don't know; I never saw him walk in earnest." But no sooner had Fleming retired than, throwing the end of his cigar into the fire, he turned round to the layer of odds and said—

"If you would like to have a little more money against Fleming, Brydon, you can lay me £100 to £50.

"You may put it down," replied the other, "if you will tell me what you are going on."

"Willingly. Unless



"You can lay me £100 to £50."

he is very vain, it is always very dangerous to bet against a man who backs himself; besides, when we were quartered at Portsmouth I once saw Fleming, for a joke, do a thing which, though I believe no great feat, would puzzle any man in this room to perform."

"You recollect at one end of the cricket ground there was a skittle alley, and after play, or when their side was in, men would sometimes have a turn at that fine old English game. Precious duffers at it, too, they were for the most part. Fleming was in there one day, chaffing a couple of men who were playing. When they had finished, he put up the pins again and said, 'Now if you fellows can play let's see you take those down, one pin at a time, that is, the nine pins in nine shots. You mustn't upset two a time, remember, or you will not have done what I mean.'

"Bah," said one of the men, "do it, of course I can't, or you either. I will lay you ten to one you can't do it."

"I think I can," replied Fleming quietly, "although it isn't easy. You *shall* lay me ten to one in shillings," and to our astonishment Fleming proceeded to accomplish the feat.

"I didn't know that he could play skittles, and most certainly don't know that he can walk, but he *might*, I'm backing him on the off."

Such were the events which had led up to the match now taking place. Fleming had started at seven in the morning, accompanied only by two brother officers, one of whom was acting as umpire.

When he had accomplished his first twelve miles in two hours and a half and then stopped to breakfast, these gentlemen thought that he would win his wager easily. But the pace was too good to last, and when Byng arrived just as Fleming was finishing his thirtieth mile, the match had begun

to look very black for the pedestrian. He was untrained, he had no experience of walking matches, and he had nobody to coach him. Whatever the man's capabilities might be he did not know how to make the most of them. As he had not understood the husbanding of his own powers in the early part of his undertaking, so now he did not know how to use what was left of them. He was losing time on every mile; there were twenty

more weary miles to tramp, and each one of them took him longer than those that had gone before. All the fiery dash of the morning was gone and the afternoon saw the sorely distressed man still struggling gamely with the task which it was rapidly becoming an obvious impossibility that he should perform. Had Byng not arrived at this critical juncture it had been little use his arriving at all; but the minute he understood the state of things he made a rapid calculation in his head, examined Fleming critically as he walked alongside him, and then said:

"I tell you what, old boy; if you're game and will do as I tell you, you will just pull through; but there won't be much to spare."

"I'm about cooked," replied Fleming, "but I'm quite good to go on till you say it's hopeless."