

THOROUGHBREDS

BY W.S. FRASER.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

At the bank down in the village—well, at nine o'clock Mortimer, feeling the virtue of early effort, with the money of redemption in his pocket entered into the resumption of his duties. At the earliest possible moment after the vault was opened he made his way to the box that contained the money. He thought it wouldn't really matter; he would transfer the three thousand to the account himself, and nobody would know of the change. Leaving the box where it was for a little in the way of subtle strategy, he came out and bustled himself over other matters.

To Mortimer's slight astonishment, presently the cashier, Mr. Lane, came out from his office, and speaking somewhat carelessly, said: "Mr. Mortimer, you have that Porter note and money in charge. It is due to-morrow isn't it?"

Looking up, Mortimer saw Lane's eye fixed upon his face with peculiar intensity. He flushed out of sheer nervousness. "Yes, sir," he stammered, "it is." "I'll attend to it at once."

"Ah!" there was a peculiar draw in the cashier's voice as he spoke; "ah, I had a communication from Mr. Porter yesterday, asking if the note had been paid."

Mortimer felt his knees shake—something was choking him. Had the devil of mischief taken the salvation of Alan's good name out of his hands—had his work been for nothing.

"I couldn't understand it," went on the cashier. His voice sounded like the clang of the fire bell to the listening man, though it was even modulated, cold and steady in its methodical precision. "I thought Porter knew the money was here to meet the note," said Lane, still speaking, "but my attention being called to the matter, I looked up the papers. I found one thousand dollars missing!" He was looking steadily at Mortimer; his eyes were searching the young man's very soul. There was accusation, denunciation, abhorrence in the cashier's gaze.

Mortimer did not speak. He was trying to think. His brain worked in erratic faculty. The slanting babble of Old Bill thrust itself upon him; the roar of the race course was in his ears, deadening his senses, not a sane, relevant word rose to his lips. He was like a child stricken by fear. In an instant way he felt the dishonor that was Alan Porter's being given him.

The cashier waited for Mortimer to say something; then he spoke again with reproach in his voice. "I at once sent a messenger to ask you to return from your home in Emerson to clear up this matter; he discovered that you had not been there; that your mother was not ill. May I ask where you were yesterday?"

"I was at Gravesend, sir—at the races," answered Mortimer defiantly. This speech broke the lethargy that was over him; his mind cleared—he commenced to think sanely.

"Can you tell me," proceeded Lane, "where the balance of Mr. Porter's three thousand dollars is?"

"It's in the box," "That's not it," "It's in the box," repeated Mortimer, firmly.

"We can soon settle that point," declared the cashier, going hurriedly into the vault and reappearing instantly with the box in his hand.

"He opened it and stared at the package of bills that rose up from freed from the pressure of the lid. With nervous fingers he counted the contents.

"I beg your pardon," he exclaimed in a quick jerky way. "The three thousand dollars is here, but these bills have been put in the box this morning; they were not there last night. It is not the money that was taken away, either. That was one bill, a thousand dollar note; and here are" he counted them again—six one hundreds and eight fifties, besides the original two of the one thousand. You put these notes back, Mr. Mortimer," he said, tapping the desk with two fingers of the right hand.

"I did."

"And you took the money yesterday or the day before?"

"I did not."

"Ah!" Lane repeated in a drier, more severe tone than he had used before. This "Ah" of the cashier's, with its many gradations of tone, had been a most useful weapon in his innumerable financial battles. It could be made to mean anything—everything; hung out at haphazard it always caught his opponent off guard; it was a subtle threat, and while one pondered over its possible meaning, Lane could formulate in his mind more decisive expressions.

"Ah," he repeated, adding, "if you did not steal the money, who did? And if you did not take it, why did you put it back?"

With an expressive sweep of the hand outward the cashier stood waiting, his tall, narrow head, topped by careful brushed gray hair, thrust forward in the attitude of a parrot about to strike with its beak.

"I can't answer those questions," answered the man he was grilling. "The money to pay Mr. Porter's note is here; and I fancy that is all the bank needs to concern itself about. It was entrusted to me, and now I am prepared to turn it over."

"Quite true; yes, quite true; but it might have been vastly different. That is the point that more concerns the bank. Whoever took the money?" and he bowed, deprecatingly, with ironical consideration to Mortimer—"must have needed a thousand dollars for—well, some speculative purpose, perhaps. Good fortune enabled the some one to make good, and the money has been replaced. Is that so?"

The cashier straightened up, threw his head back, and actually smiled. He had scored linguistically—by a clever manipulation of the sentence he had made the some one who had replaced the money the same one who had replaced it. That was accusation by inference, if you like. As the other did not speak, Lane added: "I will wire for Mr. Crane to come at once; this is a matter for investigation."

Mortimer bowed his head in acquiescence; what could he say—what other stand could the bank take? "You might remain at your desk," he casually said, "if there is any mistake we'll discover it, no doubt."

Mortimer felt like one dead, indeed as a dishonored man he was better dead. The bank was like a mausoleum, and he a lost spirit haunting its precincts in quest of the undefiled body that had been his but yesterday. Crane, the teller, certainly shunned him as he would a leper. Lane, vindictively pleased that he had unearthed the villain, drew his small soul into a shell of cold, stolid reserve, much as a sea spider might house his unpleasant body in a discarded castle of pink and white.

Alan was late—he had not come yet. Mortimer waited in suffering suspense for his appearance. What would come of it all. Now that the money was replaced, if the boy admitted his guilt to Crane, probably no further action would be taken, but he would be dishonored in the sight of his employer. Mortimer had sought to avert this; had not denounced Alan in the first instance; by good fortune had been able to replace the money; even now refused to divulge the name of the culprit. He was well aware of the mass of circumstantial evidence, the outcome of his own hurried actions, that pointed to himself as the guilty one. Better this than that he should announce the boy, a dishonor to the lad might kill his father; for Mortimer was well aware of the doctor's edict. And Allan, the girl he loved as his life, would hang her head in shame forever more. He was anxious to see Alan before the cashier did; he did not want the boy to deny taking the money at first, as he might do if he were unaware of the circumstances; it would place him in a wrong light.

Just before twelve Alan Porter came hurriedly in. He had missed his train the night before, he explained in a general way to all. Mortimer stepped up to him almost at once speaking with low, earnest rapidity; the cashier was in his own office and Mr. Cass was not within earshot.

"I put the money back, but its loss had been discovered yesterday. I have been accused of taking it, but I have denied it, accusing no one, but thinking it that you borrowed it, thinking it no great harm, as it was your father's money."

Alan would have interrupted him, but Mortimer said, "Wait a minute," and then continued: "There will be nothing done to you, I feel sure, if you will take this stand, because of your father's connection with Crane. It will save me from dishonor—this, if you will."

"Mr. Porter."

It was the cashier's voice of Damascus steel cutting in on Mortimer's low pleading tones.

Alan turned his head, and Mr. Lane, becoming said, "will you step into my office for a minute?"

The cashier's one minute drew its weary length into thirty; and when Alan Porter came out again, Mortimer saw the boy sought to avoid him. He denied taking the money? My God! the full horror of Mortimer's hopeless position flashed upon him like the lurid light of a destroying forest fire. He could read in every line of the boy's face an accusation of himself. He had trembled when it was a question of Alan's dishonor; now that the ignominy was being thrust upon him, he showed a bravery that he possessed in great part made him a hero. If through his endeavor to save the boy he was to shoulder the guilt, not of his own volition, but without hope of escape, he would stand to it like a man. What would it profit him to denounce the boy.

Harking back with rapidity over his actions, Alan saw that everything which implicated him. Once he thought of his mother and wavered; but she would believe him if he said he had not done it. He decided to stand to it. He was the world of Brookfield would despise the name of her son if it were thought that he had sought to testify falsely against his friend. And was not Alan the brother of Allan?

Mentally his argument, his analysis of the proper course to pursue was tor-

tuous, not definable, or to be explained in concise phraseology; but the one thought that ran paramount over all others was, that he must take his iniquitous punishment like a man. He had fought so strongly to shield the brother of the girl he loved that the cause in all its degradation had occurred to him.

At one o'clock the president, Crane, arrived from New York, and in him was bitterness because of his yesterday's defeat. His hand, a small fortune, even when his fingers seemed to tighten on the coin, too. That was one happening. John Porter had gained over twenty thousand dollars. This made him quite independent of the bank. Probably she, too, would think him a thief. He admitted to himself that the evidence was sufficient to destroy any one's faith in his innocence, and he was helpless, quite to despair; he was limited to simple denial, unless accused her brother; even had he been so disposed, there was nothing to back up a denunciation of the boy. He Alan stepped out on the sidewalk in gratitude; the latter must know he had put his neck in a noose to save him. Now that one of them needs be dishonored, why did not Alan prove himself a hero and accept the gage of equity. Even worse, Alan was shielding himself behind this terrible burden of circumstantial evidence which impeded him, the innocent one, on every side.

As he resumed his place at the desk close to the brother and sister, Alan looked defiantly at him. He could see in the boy's eyes malignant detestation, a glimmer of triumph as though he felt that Mortimer was irrevocably in the toils. The lad was like a stripping Judas; his attitude filled Mortimer with loathing. He stole a look into the girl's face. Would she, too, say with her eyes, "Behold, here is Barabaras!"

A thrill of ecstatic comfort warmed his being. In Allan's eyes was the first touch of kindness he had known in this hour of trial; faith, and sorrow, and cheer, and love were all there, striving for mastery; no furtive weakening, no uncertain questioning, no remonstrance of reproval—nothing to offend him, and love, and love, the boy's looks had angered him, had caused him to waver, had made the self-sacrifice seem too great when repaid with ingratitude, all these thoughts flashed in an instant, and he felt that one who loved him, and who in the hour of darkness the girl stood by him, and he would also stand firm. She would believe in him, and his sacrifice would be as nothing. He had under the same roof, the same roof of dishonor from her, from her brother, from her parents, and he would continue to the end. He would tell no one but his mother the full truth; she must know. Her touch thrilled him; she had women he loved, still his, he could brave the judgment of all others. Perhaps not willingly in the first place he would have taken upon himself the blame, but he had stepped out of good motive he had incurred it.

Mortimer heard the brother say, "I think you had better not," then the girl's voice, clear and decisive, answering, "I will, I must."

Alan left his sisters' side, and she, stepping up to the wicket, said, "Will you please come out for a minute, Mr. Mortimer, I want to speak with you."

He passed around to her side. Crane the teller, were still closeted in the father's office; the cashier was in her into the counting house that with her into the counting house that with her into the counting house, the consequent improvement to her father, the power to pay off the indebtedness—all that had passed that day in the way of thankfulness. The happiness that was in her rippled her face into smiles. When the door creaked on its hinges as it swung open, she laughed. It was a thriffling old door, such as a bachelor kept, she murmured, as she looked through the door it creaked again on its dry hinges. Before she had laughed at the weird complaining; now it sounded like a moan of misery. Out of the door she stepped, and she was deserted; there was no one to listen.

"What is this dreadful thing all about?" and she laid her hand on his arm in a gesture of amity, of association. "My mother won't believe never gone that length in friendly demonstration before. He marvelled at her generous faith. All but dishonored, a small, strong hand lifted him to a peer of his eyes. He felt him.

"A thousand dollars was taken from the bank, and I am accused of taking it," he answered bitterly.

"You didn't, did you? I know you didn't, but I want to know how you got the money back?"

"I did not steal the money."

"Some one took it?"

"And you know who it was?"

"I do not."

"But you suspect some one?"

"He did not answer."

"Then he stole the money back?"

"He nodded his head."

"To protect somebody's good name?"

"Because it had been in my charge. I can't talk about it," he broke in, vehemently; "all I can say is, that I am innocent. If you believe that I don't care what they do. They'll be able to prove by circumstantial evidence that I took it," he added, bitterly, "and nothing that I can say will make any difference. My mother won't believe me guilty, and that's God, you don't, and I am not; thank God I am not. Beyond that I will say nothing; it is useless—worse than useless; it would be criminal; would only cast suspicion on others, perhaps innocent. I don't know what they'll do about it; the money has been repaid. They may arrest me as a felon—at any rate I shall be forced to leave the bank and go away. I don't make much difference—I am as I was before, an honest man, and I shall find other openings. It's not half so hard as I thought it would be; but I don't know what they'll do about it."

"Why should he tell you that, Alan?"

"I don't know, unless he feared it might be found out while he was away; or, perhaps he was so excited over winning a thousand dollars that he did not know what he was saying. At any rate, he took it right enough, Allan, and you ought to cut him."

"You s'nt to do that. He's innocent, I know he is—I don't care what they say. If he replaced the money, it was to shield the man who took it." She was

looking searchingly into her brother's eyes, not that she accused him of the theft, but that she was just searching for the truth.

"Do you mean it was to shield me—that I took it? No one could have taken the money except Mortimer or myself—when I leave you," this in a weary attempt at brave mockery.

Allis laid a detaining hand on his arm, the small gloved hand that guided Lauzanne to victory. "If anything happens if you are going away—I think you are right to go if you distrust you—you will see me before you leave, won't you?"

"Will you care to see me if I stand branded as a thief?" The word came very hard, but in his acidity he felt like not sparing himself; he wanted to get accustomed to the full obloquy.

"From now on come to Ringwood before going away," she answered.

"Yes, I will; and thank you. No matter how dark the shadow may make my life your kindness will be a hope light. No man is utterly lost when a good woman believes in him."

The creaking bank door waited tremulously, irritably; somebody was pushing it open from the inside. With a whine of remonstrance it swung wider, and Crane stepped on the sidewalk. He stared in astonishment at Mortimer and Allan, his brow wrinkled in anger. Only for an instant; the forehead smoothed back into its normal placidity and he spoke, well as usual, in even tones: "Good afternoon, Miss Porter. Are you going back to Ringwood?" and he nodded toward Allan's buggy.

"Yes, I am. I'm going now, Good day, Mr. Mortimer," and she held out her hand.

Mortimer hesitated, and then, flushing, took the gloved fingers in his own. Without speaking, he turned and passed into the bank.

"May I go with you?" asked Crane. "I want to see your father."

"Yes, I shall be glad to drive you over," the girl answered.

(To be Continued.)

"Yes, I care," he answered, "and it seemed all so dark before you brought the sunlight in with you; now I'm glad that they've accused me; somebody else might have suffered and had no one to believe in him. But I must go home—to my prison, it seems like now—when I leave you," this in a weary attempt at brave mockery.

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(To be Continued.)

WATER PROBLEM WILL BE DEBATED TO-NIGHT

At Public Meeting Called by Mayor Morley—Diagrams of Present System Prepared.

(From Wednesday's Daily.)

This evening ratepayers and the public generally will have another opportunity of hearing the water problem discussed. This question has been before the council for so long now that many citizens are becoming tired of it, and no person realizes this better than His Worship Mayor Morley and the aldermen. But, all especially the former, are determined that it shall not be allowed to drop into oblivion until something definite is decided upon. In the words of the Mayor, more water is sadly needed; in fact it is imperative that there should be some improvement in that direction before another summer. The official mentioned expresses the opinion that the city water supply generally will have another opportunity of hearing the water problem discussed. This question has been before the council for so long now that many citizens are becoming tired of it, and no person realizes this better than His Worship Mayor Morley and the aldermen. 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