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THE WHISKY RUNNERS



A ROMANCE OF THE NORTH-WEST
MOUNTED POLICE

BY

REGINALD WYNNE, M. C.

ALSO THE SERIAL

DERBY DICK

(TO BE CONTINUED MONTHLY).



THE AUTHOR (1914)

TO THE FRASER:

I wish this stream were wine;
And if 'twere wine, then I
Would drink my fill.

(Not by Omar Khayam.)

The Whisky Runners

A Romance of the N. W. M. Police

By

REGINALD WYNNE, M. C.

Author of

"The Black Peril," "The Mad Rancher of Wood Lake,"

"The Fatal Fence," Etc., Etc.

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CHAPTER I.

Tricked.

INSPECTOR COMBRONE, of the North-West Mounted Police, rode slowly away from the Redwood Homestead, which nestled prettily among the foothills of the Rocky Mountains.

A frown, suggestive of great discontent, marred his keen-cut face. He had just left the ranch of his good friend Seth Redwood; but there had been another visitor there as well—Norman Hurleigh, whose ranch lay further up the foothills. Norman Hurleigh was a fine-built, good-looking chap, and Nelly Redwood had welcomed him so warmly that the police-instructor had mounted his horse and ridden away as nearly in a fit of sulks as is possible for a sensible man.

After a time, he tried to concentrate his thoughts on his professional affairs; but here again things looked gloomy, for he had to admit that he was not carrying out his duties with that success which he desired.

His superiors were continually strafing him for his failure to break up a gang of whisky-runners which was notoriously operating in the large district under his control.

Since the law prohibiting the sale of spirits in Alberta had come into force, smuggling had been rife, especially in the outlying districts.

What made it difficult for the authorities to put this down, was the fact that people who were otherwise perfectly honest did not look upon this illicit trade as a crime. Instead of joining in with the police to suppress the traffic, everyone seemed to be in league to protect the law breakers.

On reaching his quarters, he handed his horse over to an orderly, and entered his office. There were several official envelopes, which he tore open and perused the contents.

As he read them the gloom on his face became more accentuated.

"Inspector Combrone," he said bitterly to himself, "if you don't buck up and bring off a coup, I can see you getting the dirty kick-out. What's this, I wonder?"

He picked up a soiled envelope addressed to him in a badly-written hand, and opened it.

"Now I wonder if this is genuine?" he muttered; then read the words which were written on the slip of paper in his hand:

"If you want to snaffle the whisky-running outfit be at a spot on the west bank of the Manater River, at a point just opposite where the river branches off, at eight o'clock tonight.

"One Who Wants Revenge"

The inspector eyed the missive curiously, then made a gesture of disgust.

"Some cur going back on his pals," he muttered thoughtfully. "At any rate, it's not up to me to blame him, and I suppose I must take advantage of the opportunity. I don't well see what object anyone can have in sending me on a wild-goose chase; but I'll carry this thing through on my own."

He called his orderly, and gave instructions for a fresh horse to be ready for him at once. It was now five o'clock, and the ride before him was at least twelve miles, so he decided to set out and travel leisurely.

By doing this he would have a comparatively fresh horse when he arrived at his destination; and previous experience had taught him what an advantage that would be under certain circumstances which might well arise.

He arrived at his destination with plenty of time to spare, and tethered his horse among a small cluster of pine trees.

It was a brilliant moonlight night, and he was able to take up a position from whence he had a commanding view of the river. But an uncomfortable feeling took possession of him, for it seemed certain that he must be the victim of a hoax.

His trained eye told him that the formation of the country was the last that would be chosen for any enterprise of the sort suggested. The surface of the land was broken by rugged ravines, making it impassable for any wheeled vehicle, while the rocks forming the banks of the broad, swift-flowing stream rose almost perpendicularly from the water.

But as he was there, he determined to wait till the time mentioned in the note, and at least was buoyed up by the knowledge that no one would hear of his escapade.

Suddenly he became aware that a shadowy object had rounded a bend in the river, some distance from where he lay concealed. A moment later and he perceived it was a canoe coming in his direction.

After all, his journey might not have been in vain.

Then he made out another canoe following in the rear of the first. A moment later and two others drew in sight. The frail craft were moving slowly, being evidently heavily laden.

Yet as he watched them gliding silently along he felt that after all he had been hoaxed in some way, for it would be impossible for the cargoes to be landed, on account of the steepness of the rocky banks.

Then a sound fell on his ear which decided the matter he was turning over in his mind.

It was that of a wheeled conveyance on the road on the other side of the river. A moment later he could dimly make out a light

wagon, drawn by a couple of horses, come to a standstill by the side of the broad stream; then he perceived that the canoes were heading for that spot.

As he gazed across the stretch of water he realized that after all he had been tricked, and for one mad moment he thought of plunging into the swift-running stream, and by swimming across, frustrate the scheme of these law-breakers.

A moment's reflection brought home the absurdity of such a course, for he knew that he would only put himself at the mercy of the malefactors without a chance of giving any good result. No, the only thing to do was to regain his horse and ride to the nearest ford, some two and a-half miles away.

He strode to where he had left his horse, and, mounting it, rode cautiously across a rugged ravine which separated him from a stretch of open prairie-land. Once on level ground, he immediately put his horse into a gallop, heading it for the crossing.

He knew that his chance of capturing the whisky-runners where he had seen them was out of the question; but he would stand an excellent chance of getting on their trail, and that might lead to eventual success.

He wondered whether the writer of the note of warning had really intended to hoax him, or whether that person himself had not been taken in. He could not perceive what good the runners hoped to gain by putting him wise to the fact that an illicit cargo had been run. There was a chance, of course, that they may have expected him to take all his men with him, in which case they could have carried out their designs elsewhere with infinitesimal risk. As it was, there was every chance of his obtaining a clue to the wrongdoers, even if he were unable to run them to earth this time.

The pace at which he was travelling soon brought him to the ford, then having crossed, he turned along the road running beside the water towards where the canoes had taken their cargoes.

On reaching the spot, he found that the mysterious gang had departed. Reining in his horse, he sprang to the ground and, striding towards the river, scrutinized the rocky bank.

He saw that there was a shelf of rock which was specially adapted for landing cargoes from canoes. Then he scrutinized the ground where the wagon had been drawn up, on the look-out for some clue by which he might trace the ownership of the outfit.

But there was onthing in the shape of the print of a broken horse-shoe, or anything else which he could discover.

Mounting his horse, he set out once more in the direction the tracks led, which was along the only road leading from the river. The moonlight was strong enough to show up the tracks of the wagon plainly in the loose sand, and it was only when he crossed a rocky cutcrop that he was unable to make them out.

On reaching the soft ground again, the marks showed up clearly once more, and he raced along, all his professional instincts fully roused.

At length he came to where a road branched off to the right, close beside which was the house of a small rancher who also carried on the business of a store.

Checking his horse somewhat, he guided it to the store, where there was a light still burning.

"At home, Donelly?" he called out.

The door was thrown open.

"Thought I heard a horse," said the owner of the store. "Ha, inspector, it's you, is it? Will you come inside and rest for a bit? Been on patrol, eh?"

"No, just taking an evening ride, and hoped to meet a friend who was driving this way from Manatchee, but somehow I seem to have missed him. I suppose you haven't seen a two-horse outfit pass here coming from the river?"

He asked the question with well-assumed carelessness.

"No, I can't say that I have," returned the other thoughtfully. "The only chap I've seen round here tonight was young Burleigh, who called for some oats. I expect you met him."

"Burleigh!" ejaculated the inspector. "No, I've not met him. I've just come from the river, and his ranch is in the opposite direction."

"I thought he took the road to the river," said the storekeeper slowly. "Though I can't be in any way sure. I had to hurry off to a cow that had a bad touch of colic."

But the news had opened a train of thought in the police-officer's mind.

"What time was Burleigh here?" he inquired carelessly as he gathered up his reins, which he had relinquished so as to set light to his pipe.

"About seven-thirty, as far as I remember," returned the other.

After a few moments further chat, Combrone rode away, taking the road leading to Burleigh's ranch. An examination of the track showed that a wagon had traversed it very recently.

As soon as he was out of sound of the store, he sent his horse along at a gallop.

The idea that Burleigh was mixed up in this illicit trade had never previously occurred to him. He had always looked on him as a particularly decent young chap, who gave every promise of making a success of ranching. However, he remembered that he had heard casual remarks to the effect that the young rancher had suddenly begun to spend a lot of money, both with regards the purchase of stock and improvements to the homestead.

Suddenly the inspector's face clouded, for another thought had passed through his mind—he remembered the welcome Nelly Redwood had given Burleigh.

As the thought flashed through his brain, he began to check his horse. How could he possibly bring ruin upon the man Nelly perhaps loved?

The very fact that he himself loved the girl was a sufficient reason for him to stay his hand. Yet he had his duty to perform, and he had always done that in the past unflinchingly. Was he to turn aside now from the road of honor?

His duty was plain. And come what might, if Burleigh was guilty, he would bring him to book. Again, if Nelly did love

Burleigh, it could only be in ignorance of his real character; and to show that up might save the girl untold suffering.

The inspector was the soul of honor, and as soon as he had decided what it was right to do, he did not argue with himself as to whether his actions might be ascribed to jealousy. He knew they were not, and that was enough.

He galloped along the twisting trail, the sporting instincts always roused in a healthy-minded man by a hunt, whether he be the hunted or the pursuer, took possession of him. If he was to be successful, he must catch up with his quarry before he passed through the entrance of Burleigh's ranch.

On the highway, he had the right to examine any vehicle which he deemed suspicious; whereas he was not entitled to enter private property without a warrant.

The good horse he bestrode responded gamely to his repeated calls to go over faster than before, and at last he was rewarded by the sight of a vehicle moving at a good pace ahead of him.

Guiding his horse on to the softest part of the trail to deaden the sound of the hoof-beats, he raced forward at top speed. He realized that he was now quite close to the entrance to the ranch, and that he would win or lose by only a small margin.

To his delight, he noted that the figure ahead had not turned on his seat, evidently quite unaware that he was being followed; and at last he knew that he had won the stern chase, and halloed out to the driver ahead.

Burleigh glanced round, evidently surprised, but checked his horses and brought them to a standstill.

"Sees he has no chance of escape," muttered Combrone, "and means to bluff."

He was beside the vehicle the next moment, and a quick glance showed that the body of the wagon contained a bulky cargo covered over by a canvas sail.

"Hallo, Combrone," exclaimed the rancher in surprise. "Anything wrong? You seem to have been taking it out of that plug of yours."

He glanced from the stern face of the policeman to the foam-flecked horse he bestrode; then once again he fixed his gaze on the inspector's face with a look of puzzled inquiry.

"It's no good your trying to bluff, Norman Burleigh," retorted Combrone coldly. "I may tell you, once for all, the game's up."

For an instant the rancher's face clouded angrily, then he gave out a forced laugh.

"If that's the way you're going to talk I'll wish you good night," he said.

He shook the reins to urge his horses forward, but the inspector, spurring his own animal, made it spring forward so that he was able to seize the rein of the nearest horse in the team.

Burleigh's face was ashen white.

"What in thunder do you mean, Combrone?" he shouted angrily. "Let go that rein or——"

He raised his whip threateningly, but Combrone had already slipped from his saddle.

"It's no good, Norman Burleigh," he said. "I'm going to search your wagon, so the quieter you are the better it will be for you," he ended meaningly, for the other had descended, and was advancing towards him.

Suddenly Burleigh gave a jeering laugh.

"Search it then!" he rapped out. "I suppose your uniform entitles you to do so.

"It does," agreed the other quietly, as he led his horse to the rear and hitched it to the back of the wagon.

A moment later he had flung back the sail which covered the contents, displaying not the bags of whisky which he had expected, but bags of grain.

For an instant he was so taken aback that he could hardly speak. He had already been hoaxed once before that night, and now he was confident that he had been tricked again.

The rancher's next remark did not soothe his ruffled spirits.

"Sold again, eh, inspector!" exclaimed Burleigh, with a contemptuous laugh, as he clambered on to his vehicle.

The inspector disregarded the fact that he had so far been in the wrong. Instead of making some sort of apology he retorted angrily:

"You've had the laugh at me twice tonight, but I swear I'll have you yet."

"P'raps, inspector, and p'raps not," he called out tauntingly, as he whipped up his horses and drove away, leaving a very disconsolate member of the Mounted Police with a long ride before him to get home.

CHAPTER II.

An Unexpected Discovery.

Norman Burleigh was up early the next morning, and harnessed his team to the wagon.

He was about to drive away when the sound of hoof-beats fell on his ear. The next instant his face lit up with welcome as Nelly Redwood cantered round one of the buildings and checked her horse beside the vehicle.

"Morning, Norman," cried out the girl gaily. "Where are you off to so early? Was hoping you'd come for a ride and have a look at some of those steers dad bought last week. He's away in town today, and I'm on my lonesome."

"Certainly I will, Nelly," replied the man, springing lightly from the wagon. "I was only going to brand a few of the youngsters. That can wait, and I'll outspan the team in half a jiffy and come with you."

"No, no!" protested the girl, with a laugh. "I'm not going to interfere with your arrangements. I know you're busy getting everything shipshape, so if you'll ask me to come with you I'll be glad to give you a hand in rounding up."

"Do you mean it?" he asked eagerly. "To tell you the truth I'm rather anxious to brand my little lot. There are some shady

characters about these parts, just now, and it's always safest to have one's mark on them."

The girl nodded. "I'm keen on coming. I've never seen that range of yours. How far is it from here?"

"Sixteen miles by road, and I have to take the wagon to carry the irons, and the rest of the branding outfit."

"In that case I'll drive with you, and leave Punch here. We can put my saddle in the wagon, and I can ride one of these plugs of yours when we get there. Will that suit your highness?"

"Down to the ground," replied Burleigh cheerily.

In a few moments the saddle was transferred from the horse to the wagon, and the animal itself turned loose in a corral. Then they drove away.

The road leading to Burleigh's ranch was uneven and tortuous, but the scenery was of wild beauty. As the road twined higher they obtained a magnificent view of the country, dotted here and there with comfortable-looking homesteads.

"There's been a tremendous change in these parts during the last eight years," said Nelly, as she gazed at the panorama below. "I can remember it when there was only one homestead to every fifty you see now. Those were in the real old cattle days when you could ride a hundred miles without coming to a fence. I think I liked it better then. It was wilder, you know."

"And so were the people, by all accounts," laughed Norman. "How one managed to keep one's cattle in these days, I cannot imagine. Wasn't there a tremendous lot of cattle thieving?"

"Not so much as you'd think," replied the girl thoughtfully. "You see, cattle-thieves got very short shrift when they were caught, and knew what to expect; whereas, now they know they will get so many months in the penitentiary and are also able to judge the worth of the risks they run. But talking of those sort of people, have you heard the news that the whisky-runners were at work late night and got a cargo through?"

She glanced at him as she spoke, and did not fail to see the start he gave.

"No," he said, a trifle shortly, then inquired with interest, "Where did you get that news?"

The girl's laughing face had suddenly become grave.

"Lando, one of our half breeds, was full of it this morning. He said the runners had tricked the police again, and got their stuff through safely. I don't know how he learnt it, but a breed always knows what's going on before a white man does."

"The police don't seem to be exactly distinguishing themselves just about now, do they?" remarked Burleigh with some irony in his tone.

"One can hardly blame them," returned the girl. "For every one seems to be on the side of the runners. When they do catch the gang I expect the sentences will be very stiff ones."

"M'yes!" assented Burleigh doubtfully. "But they've got to catch them first. That's where the hermit lives," he added, abruptly changing the subject, and jerking his whip towards the entrance to a ravine, which led between two rocky bluffs on the right.

"What! That funny old man, Enoch Dresden?" inquired the girl with animation. "What does he do in that wilderness?"

"He's supposed to be mining, but whether that is just a phase of his madness, it is hard to say. They tell me he has shown some quite decent quartz at Donelly's store, but if he has struck a vein, it's queer he doesn't employ more labor, for he only has one breed, and from all accounts he has plenty of dollars."

"From the look of that fence he seems determined that he'll keep out intruders," laughed the girl, as she surveyed the wire fence which run across the entrance to the ravine. "Perhaps, though, he put that up to keep himself in."

Burleigh gave a chuckle.

"He's a bit of a mystery, but I daresay he's a decent old chap, though, I've only come across him once or twice. The extraordinary part is that, though he appears to be so old, he is as active as many men half his years. Here we are at the entrance to my domain," he added, as he pulled up the horses in front of a wire gate and handed the reins to his companion.

After going through the gate, they drove along a still rougher track, twisting and turning among the rocky hillocks, which dotted the otherwise rolling prairie, till at last they came in view of some old log buildings beside a large cattle corral.

The search for the particular bunch of steers they wanted proved a long job, and the two, riding apart, covered a big stretch of country before Burleigh signalled to the girl that he had located them.

Then the real work commenced, for the youngsters were so wild that even when they had bunched them together, first one and then another, succeeded in breaking away.

On these occasions, one of the pair remained with the little herd whilst the other went in pursuit of the delinquent. A black steer was the worst offender, and succeeded on three occasions in getting away, but each time was rounded up by Nelly Redwood, who proved herself as good as most men at the difficult work.

Just when the herd had been brought to the corral and were on the point of entering, the black steer broke away once more. Burleigh rode after it this time, whilst the girl cleverly proceeded to force the reluctant steers into the corral. It was by no means easy work, and required skill and patience, but eventually she had them all in the enclosure.

Then she gazed over the rolling prairie for her friend, but he was nowhere in sight. She was in no way uneasy, for she realized that he was probably pursuing the steer down one of the many ravines, and was thus hidden from view.

Essentially practical, she proceeded to light a fire for the heating of the branding irons, so that when Burleigh appeared, no further time would be lost.

But when she looked in the wagon for some charcoal, which was necessary for the work in hand, she was unable to find any.

Reasoning that as he had not brought any with him, it was because he had a supply in one of the outbuildings, she at once began a search. But she was unsuccessful, though she investigated

all the likely places she could find. Eventually she made her way to a wagon-shed, standing some distance from the other buildings, and glanced searchingly round.

But there was no sign of what she required.

Suddenly her eyes caught sight of a board which looked like a partly-opened door in the thick timber-and-mud-constructed wall.

The next instant a cry of surprise intermingled with pain, broke from her lips.

Inside the cupboard-like interior of the wall was piled keg upon keg of whisky.

CHAPTER III.

A Night Drive.

For a few moments Nelly Redwood stood gazing at the unexpected sight.

"He must have left this open by mistake," she murmured, as she swung the door to.

The door closed with a snap, and now the planks of which it was made looked as though they formed nothing but a solid wall. It was indeed, a very skilfully-contrived place, and, unless the door was left carelessly open, would defy discovery.

But what did it mean, wondered the girl, as she stood irresolute. Was Norman Burleigh a whisky-runner,—otherwise an outlaw?"

There seemed no doubt as she recalled the curt reply he had made to her in reference to the runners on the previous night.

On returning to the corral she was surprised to find that Burleigh had not yet returned, and though she scanned the surrounding country carefully, could see no signs of him.

"May have come a buster," she said a trifle anxiously as she hurried to her horse and swung herself into the saddle.

But though she rode a long way in the direction he had taken, she was unable to find any trace of him.

Not knowing what to do, she rode round in circles, peering into the ravines which exist through the prairie. At last she caught sight of his riderless horse grazing quietly in a dip of ground.

A feeling of dread took possession of her when, on reaching the spot, she found no sign of the man she sought. There was nothing to indicate in what direction it was best to look, but she decided to make a thorough search in every ravine in the vicinity.

At last her search was rewarded, and drew a cry of horror from her lips as she saw the form of Norman Burleigh lying at the bottom of a ravine.

Flinging herself from her horse, she dashed down the rocky sides of the gulch to where he lay. At first it seemed her worst fears were well founded, but a quick examination showed that he had sustained serious injury to his forehead.

Running to the small stream which trickled through the bottom of the ravine, she filled her Stetson hat with water and returned to her charge. After she had bathed the injured place, he suddenly moved, and attempted to struggle up; but she managed to

restrain him, realizing that his senses had not yet returned. Then, talking soothingly, she persuaded him to lie still till he was in possession of his faculties.

At last he was able to speak.

"What has happened, Nell?" he inquired dazedly. "I remember following that black steer, and then—now I remember—I tried to turn him from the ravine. Cut it a bit too fine, and went over the edge. Where's the plug? Broken his neck, I expect. We went down a fearful purler together."

Nell reassured him as to the horse, and urged him to lie still till he felt stronger, but he only laughed at her remonstrances.

The girl had no difficulty in securing the horse, and led it down to its owner.

"Now, if you can only get into the saddle, we shall get along swimmingly," said Nell, as she helped him to rise.

Norman Burleigh made no effort to argue, and he managed to scramble into the saddle. Even then he would have been helpless without the girl, for he swayed unsteadily, and more than once nearly lurched from his seat.

On reaching the shack, Nell insisted on his lying down while she brewed some tea.

Norman Burleigh sat up with a start.

"Good heavens, Nell, it's night—or will be in a few minutes!" he exclaimed in a tone of keen perturbation. "Don't you see, we must be getting home. Come along, we ought to trek at once."

But the girl was beside him in an instant.

"Be sensible, Norman," she said almost sternly. "You know you are not fit to travel at present."

"Then you must go, Nell," said the other with decision.

"What, and leave you here, like this?" asked the girl. "Not on my life."

Burleigh lay in a state bordering on distraction. He realized that her good name was at stake, and that she was deliberately sacrificing it, like the good chum she was.

Of one thing he was assured, that if Nell's presence leaked out, it would be the talk of the neighborhood. No one knew better than he the smallmindedness of a prairie community in matters of this sort, and he writhed in desperation that she should have her name bandied about by worthless busybodies.

"Now, try this cup of tea," said Nell, breaking in on his unpleasant reflections. "I can tell you you're lucky to be able to take it, for that crack on the head would have killed nine out of ten men."

He drank the tea, and professed himself the better for it.

"And now, Nell," he said in a masterful tone, "we must make a start. I mean it, so there's no use our arguing on the subject."

For an instant the girl was silent, then she turned towards the door.

"Very well, I give in if you will let me hitch in the team."

"What you say goes," replied Norman with a laugh.

A little later she returned, and informed him the team was ready.

"I've let the steers out of the corral," she added with a smile. "I thought you wouldn't care for them to be boxed up there till you get well again."

"I'd clean forgotten 'em," he admitted as he rose, and the next moment would have fallen had not the girl gone to his assistance.

He was soon, however, in the wagon, Nelly taking the reins and driving. The moon was, luckily, shining brightly, so she was able to keep on the rough track which formed the road. As they drove along the cool night air revived him, and after a time he professed to be feeling quite all right again, with the exception of a headache.

"I think the best thing we can do is to drive past your place, and then you can get out, and no one will be the wiser."

"What about you, though?" inquired the girl doubtfully.

"Oh, I shall be as right as a fiddle," he returned. "I am only sorry I caused such a fuss."

It was therefore arranged to do as he suggested, as otherwise the girl would have to ride back home from Burleigh's homestead.

After they had travelled six miles or so they became aware that they were being followed by a horseman. It was not at all their intention that the individual inquestion should overhaul them, so Nell sent the horses forward at their best speed.

But although they had increased their pace considerably, the sound of the hoof-beats did not grow less and it was evident the stranger had increased his speed also.

"I wonder who it is," remarked the girl, as her companion turned round and stared into the gloom behind them.

"Probably one of the police," returned Burleigh, with a trace of irony. "On the look-out for whisky-runners. If it is, he'll do his best to overhaul us. Whip 'em up, and get as far ahead as possible. We shall outwit him, then, I think," he added grimly.

"Why d'you think that?" inquired the girl, as she urged the horses to greater efforts.

"Because he's pretty well certain to take the road to my place, and won't trouble to examine the trail. You see, the police regard me as a suspicious character as far as whisky-running goes," he ended with a short laugh.

Nell made no immediate reply. Her thoughts had gone to that hidden hoard of whisky-kegs which she had come upon that afternoon. After a pause, she said quietly:

"I do wish the Government would do away with that stupid law about whisky."

"Why?" inquired her companion with a light laugh.

"Because I'm sure a lot of people are whisky-running who would not think of breaking the law in any other way. It's horrible to think that anyone one knows might be caught and sent to the penitentiary," she added with a shiver.

Just then they came to where the road branched off, and keeping the horses at full stretch, they took the turning for the Redwood homestead.

"There," Inspector Combrone," laughed Burleigh, turning round and scanning the gloom behind him. "I'm afraid you'll be a trifle angry when you find you're on the wrong road."

"Inspector Combrone?" repeated the girl. "Do you think it is he?" she inquired with a trace of anxiety in her tone, while at the same time she brought the whip down on the two horses, who strained forward.

"Shouldn't be surprised," replied Burleigh. "He's made a vow he'll catch the gang, and if he doesn't, it appears things are likely to go badly with him at headquarters."

It was evident that whoever the horseman was, he had taken the other road, for after a time the girl slowed down the team, and the hoof-beats were no longer to be heard in their rear.

At last they came to the gate giving entrance to the stockyards behind the Redwood Homestead.

"You'll come in and stay the night at our place," said the girl. "We've managed to escape the curiosity of scandalmongers, anyhow, and dad will be delighted."

But Burleigh was anxious to get back home, and realizing that fact, the girl did not press him. She accordingly alighted, and promising to call the next day for her horse, made her way to her father's ranch.

Norman Burleigh drove towards his homestead with a feeling of relief that they had not encountered anyone. He was nearing his gate when he became aware of a mounted man approaching. As the stranger drew near, he saw it was one of the police, and an instant later recognized Inspector Combrone.

"Would you like to examine the wagon, inspector?" he inquired pleasantly.

"Not this time, Norman Burleigh!" returned the police-officer, with a cold meaning, as he glanced at the body of the vehicle, which he was easily able to see as empty.

CHAPTER IV.

Hot on the Trail.

Inspector Combrone was sitting in his office in Manatchee town. The gloom which had for many days settled on his face disappeared, and given place to a cheerful expression. At last he had scored a trick in the game which the whisky-runners had so long been playing with him. A man had been caught redhanded bringing a cargo of the spirit into Manatchee.

Yet, though the capture of this man would be looked upon as a feather in his cap, he knew taht he had little to do with the success. Furthermore, the prisoner had refused all information as to where he had procured the whisky.

The inspector sat waiting the arrival of the constable who had brought about the capture, hoping that he might gain some clue as to the rest of the gang.

The man entered the office, saluted, and told his tale with that precision which is instilled into members of the North-West Mounted Police.

There was not much that he had to relate. He was out on patrol the previous night when he met a wagon which had a fairly heavy

load of grain. According to instructions, he stopped the driver and made known his intention to search. He found six kegs of whisky drawn under the bags of grain, then arrested the man, and brought the prisoner and outfit to the police headquarters.

The inspector took a large map from a drawer and unrolled it on the table.

"Now point, as nearly as you can, to the place where you first encountered your prisoner," he commanded.

The constable scrutinized the map cheerfully for a few moments, and then pointed with a pencil.

"It was just on this side of that culvert, sir," he said.

The inspector gazed at the map for a few moments, then turned to the other.

"You know that district well. Is there anyone living in the direction from which this man was coming whom you have cause to suspect in any way?"

"The road he was on leads up into the foothills," returned the constable thoughtfully. "And those thereabouts are mostly a rough lot, sir."

"Yes, yes; but you've been keeping your eyes open when you've been moving among them, and have probably formed suspicions."

"Well, there is a suspicious character living up there," said the constable, pointing to a place on the map. "His name's Enoch Dresden. He's an old man, and is supposed to be mining, but it's precious little mining he does, sir."

"I know the man," said the inspector thoughtfully. "They call him the hermit round those parts."

"Yes, that's him, sir. Well, he's got one of the best light teams of horses in the district; and what he wants them for I can never see."

"It does seem curious," agreed the inspector. "I think I'll go and pay him a visit. Which is the best way to get there?"

"There's a fairly good trail nearly the whole way," said the constable, leaning over the map, "but if you cut across young Burleigh's range you'll——"

"Whose?" interjected the inspector sharply.

"Burleigh, sir."

"But Burleigh lives eight miles from the Manatee River."

"Yes, that's where his ranch is, but he owns this range up here in the foothills."

"Any suspicion of Burleigh?" inquired the inspector carelessly.

The constable gave a laugh.

"No, he's about the last I would suspect," he said briskly. "My only reason for mentioning Enoch Dresden's name is that he seems a mystery."

The inspector nodded.

"Well, you've told me all you can, I suppose. In the meanwhile you had better trace your prisoner's antecedents as far as you can. Find out who his friends are, and that sort of thing. It may give us a wrinkle."

He made a gesture for his subordinate to withdraw, and then began studying the map. After a few moments he rose briskly.

"I'll ride over to Dresden's place," he muttered; then, striding to the door, called to his orderly to bring him his horse.

On arriving at the spot which the constable had described as his meeting place with the whisky-runner, the inspector dismounted and proceeded to examine the track.

"I'm in luck," he exclaimed excitedly after a few moments' scrutiny, "for nothing has passed over here since the wagon, and unless I'm a bigger duffer than I used to be, I shall be able to follow the trail."

To an ordinary observer the marks on the road would have had no special meaning, for the impression of several wheels was plainly visible. But to the inspector the thing was plain, and used to tracking as he was, he was easily able to distinguish the most recent marks from those which had been made previously.

Once he started it was easy for him to travel at a good rate, as all he had to do was to watch that the spoor of the wheels did not branch off to either side of the road.

He had travelled for some considerable time when the track of the wheels swerved off the road and came to an end by a barbed wire fence, or, rather, the wheels became confused with others at that point.

The inspector was off his horse in a moment, and carefully inspecting the faint marks which were visible.

Letting his horse graze, he sat down, and producing his map studied it attentively, once or twice glancing round to get the bearing of prominent landmarks. After a few moments he put the map aside.

"So this fence is the boundary of Burleigh's property," he muttered with keen excitement. "Combrone, my boy, you're going to bring off a big thing after all. Strange that a decent sort of chap as I took Burleigh to be should go in for a game like this."

He rode along on the outskirts of Burleigh's range, but though he kept a bright look-out he did not catch sight of anyone within.

At last he came to the gulch up which he knew Dresden's shack was situated. There was a gate in the stiff fence which shut out the ravine to the outer world, and this Combrone flung open after dismounting.

As he did so both men and horse gave a start, for at the same moment there was the sound of a dull report up the gulch.

For an instant the police officer gazed in the direction from which the sound had come in surprise. Then he flung himself on his horse and galloped along the trail. A few minutes later he rounded a bend and came in view of some log-huts, just in time to see a hurrying figure disappear into one of them.

With a faint smile on his face the inspector guided his horse to the hut, and drew it up outside.

"Anyone at home?" he called out.

A voice from inside answered him.

"Hallo, stranger, what's your hurry?"

The police officer swung himself from the saddle, just as an old man issued from the door.

"Good day, Mr. Dresden," said the inspector genially. "My horse took fright from an explosion. Came from your mine, I expect."

The old man gave a cheery laugh.

"Yes, I suppose that was it, inspector. I fired a shot down there a few minutes ago. But come inside and sit down. Out on patrol, eh?" he asked carelessly.

"Yes, I'm riding round inspecting stock. There's a lot of glanders among horses, and some cattle with lung-sickness, so I'm compiling a list of those who have infected stock. You have two horses, I believe."

The old man was eyeing him keenly, but of this the police officer was apparently unaware, for he produced a pipe and set light to it.

"Yes, I keep a couple of plugs," said the other. "Come and have a look at them."

The inspector's eyes had been travelling swiftly around, and fell on a windlass which was being manipulated by a half-breed, some little distance up the side of the ravine.

"Mine doing any good?" he inquired with interest.

"Not much at present," returned the other. "Would you care to have a look at it? It's only a small vein we're working."

"I'm afraid I don't understand much about mining," laughed the police officer. "And I've got to buzz round a bit." He gazed as he spoke further up the gully. "Can I get on to Hurleigh's range up that way?" he inquired.

For an instant the old man hesitated, then said slowly:—

"You can get to the fence, but there's no opening through it. It's not very far from my gate to the one leading into his range."

"Thanks. Then that's what 'll do. I've got to have a look at his cattle, but of course I can't inspect them properly unless they are rounded up. Hurleigh isn't there, I suppose?"

"Shouldn't wonder," replied Dresden. "He's often up there looking after his stock."

After a few minutes' chat the inspector took his departure. There was a well-satisfied smile on his keen face as he led his horse out through the gate.

"I'm getting hot!" he exclaimed briskly, as he closed the gate after him.

He was determined to enter Hurleigh's property, and if the owner happened to be there, explain his presence by the same tale of his cattle-inspecting tour with which he had excused himself to Dresden.

He cantered his horse across the rolling prairie till he came to the fence which divided Hurleigh's range from the gully occupied by Dresden. Then he rode slowly up the fence, carefully scrutinizing the ground on either side.

Suddenly he reined in his horse with a quick exclamation of satisfaction, and swinging himself from the saddle, began to eagerly examine the ground by the fence.

"They bring the stuff across here," he muttered, with decision. "But where do they go from here?"

Leaving his horse he proceeded to follow faint marks on the ground, which to his practised eye were plainly visible, and which led him towards a stony ridge. Here, despite all his efforts, he was unable to trace them further, so he made his way to the top of the ridge.

As he topped the rise an exclamation broke from his lips.

"That settles where they lead to," he muttered with satisfaction, for, on the other side of the ridge were the cluster of log buildings beside Hurleigh's cattle corral. "I'll gamble my life that's where they keep their stuff, but it will take an organized search party to find it, so I'll let it alone to-day."

As he rode back to the gate, and along the track outside, his keen wits were thoroughly at work.

"It's a very clever scheme," he murmured complacently. "But I see through it. The runners always brought their stuff to Dresden's gully, and as soon as they had got it there, transfer it to these broken-down hovels of Burleigh's. Unless they were caught red-handed running a cargo they ran little risk, for if Dresden's place came under suspicion, nothing would be found. No one in the ordinary way would have thought of suspecting young Burleigh."

Keenly wrapt up in his profession as he was, Inspector Combrone experienced a thrill of triumph as he thought of the great triumph of the great coup he intended shortly to bring off. Had he been unsuccessful in bringing the gang to justice, he knew the number of his days in the police force would have been numbered, but now, instead of leaving the profession he loved under a cloud, he would in all probability get promotion.

Suddenly he brought his horse to a standstill and gazed fixedly in one direction.

Two figures on horseback had arrested his attention, and, though they were fully athousand yards away, he could recognize them both without difficulty. The one was Norman Burleigh, and the other Nelly Redwood. Suddenly the girl flung out an arm in the direction of a bunch of cattle, grazing about a quarter of a mile from where Combrone stood.

He could see the girl's action was a challenge for a race, and this view was borne out as the two set off at a mad gallop in the direction indicated. The horses they bestrode were evenly matched, and the struggle was a fairly even one; then the girl's horse forged its way ahead, and she reached the neighborhood of the cattle some lengths ahead of her companion.

The girl's gay laugh of triumph came faintly to the inspector as he sat on his horse in moody silence. There was a wistful look in his eye as he suddenly urged his horse forward.

"Poor Nelly!" he muttered.

Then, putting spurs to his horse, he galloped away.

CHAPTER V.

A Race to a Finish.

The following morning Nelly Redwood was astir early. It was her custom to superintend the work on her father's ranch, and see that the men started their duties punctually. She was accompanied

by the half-breed, who, besides being devoted to her, was a man who was thoroughly acquainted with the work on a cattle ranch in all its different forms.

The work done, the girl was about to ride to her breakfast, when an exclamation from Lando attracted her attention.

Turning in her saddle, she saw a horseman approaching at a gallop across the open prairie. Though she recognized that the stranger was a half-breed, she drew in her horse and awaited his arrival with curiosity.

The man drew up a few yards away, and gave the girl a respectful salute, then, turning, spoke excitedly in a low tone to Lando. The breeds conversed for a few minutes, then the stranger departed as rapidly as he had arrived.

"What's in the wind, Lando?" demanded the girl, with interest.

For a moment the breed regarded her doubtfully, then, after a glance in the direction of the rapidly disappearing figure of his friend, said in an awed tone:

"It's the police, missie."

"The police!" repeated the girl. "What's he done, then?"

"The whisky-runners, missie," replied the breed with animation. "The police have gone to the range of Meester Burleigh, and are searching for the store of whisky."

The girl gave a start, and only by an effort kept back the cry of dismay which rose to her lips.

"Who is that man who has just gone, and exactly what has happened," she commanded sternly, her face very white.

"That my brother," replied the breed. "He work for Meester Dresden, who is one of the whisky-runners so my brother just told me, missie."

"Yes, yes, go on," rapped out the girl.

"Abraham see the police this morning all round the shack and huts of Meester Burleigh. Meester Burleigh not there himself, but police search all around. Then Abraham, he try to warn his master, but he see policeman hiding by the mine. Then Abraham, he ride over here and gallop for the border, missie."

"And Mr. Burleigh?" demanded the girl anxiously.

"Abraham say they no catch him yet, missie. He not know that the police are hunting at his shack on the range. Shall I go and tell him, missie?"

"Yes! No! No! Wait a moment," exclaimed the girl excitedly.

For a few moments she sat turning the matter over in her mind, then suddenly coming to a decision she galloped up to the house. Quickly dismounting, she entered the building, and hurried to a writing-table. Dashing off a few words on a slip of paper she put it in an envelope which she placed in her pocket.

Then, returning to her horse, she got once more into the saddle.

"Not a word to anyone," she said to Lando, who had followed. "I shall be back before very long."

As she rode she gazed anxiously across the prairie in the direction from which the police would come. Her destination was Burleigh's ranch, and she was determined, if possible, to reach it

before the upholders of the law, whom she knew would hasten there directly they found what they sought.

Her quick wits had told her that there was only one way that she could help Burleigh, and that was by keeping back from him the knowledge of his danger. If he became aware of it, she knew that his chivalrous nature would prevent him from escaping, if he thought she would get into trouble for assisting him in any way.

She had thought out a little scheme which she believed would have the desired result without raising any suspicion in his mind.

As she galloped up to Burleigh's homestead she saw him making his way to the stockyard in rear of the building. Glancing in her direction, on hearing her approach, he at once changed his direction.

The girl checked her horse short as she reached him.

"Morning, Norman," she cried out cheerfully. "I've ridden over to see if you'll do me a great favor."

His face broke into a smile.

"Of course, I will, Nell," he replied readily. "What is it?"

"It sounds very absurd I'm afraid, what I am going to ask you, but it is really of the very greatest importance. You know Langville, just over the border?"

"Sure!"

"Well, I want you to take my horse, and ride there as hard as you can. When you get there you'll find directions in this letter, which you are to promise me not to open till you get to the town. Will you do as I request?"

"Of course, I will, Nell," he retorted briskly; only willing to render her any service she might require. "I'd better change saddles though, hadn't I?"

The girl nodded, and, springing to the ground, proceeded to remove her own saddle while he went for his.

Burleigh rejoined her in a few minutes, and saddled the horse again.

"Now up you get," said Nell with animation. "The sooner you're there the sooner you'll be able to perform the work I want of you."

Burleigh did as she commanded, and with a word of adieu rode swiftly away.

A heavy sigh of relief broke from the girl as he disappeared from view; then, turning, she made her way to the stable, carrying her saddle with her. As quickly as she could, she threw the saddle over Burleigh's riding horse, and girthed it. Then, putting on the bridle, she led the animal to the front of the house.

Hitching the horse to a post, she hurried inside the building, glancing eagerly around. She soon found what she sought, which was one of Burleigh's coats, and proceeded to put it on.

Then, bunching up her mass of hair, she drew down over it one of his Stetson hats, which completely hid it from view. Going to a glass, she viewed herself for a minute critically.

"That ought to do," she muttered with satisfaction, then turned towards the door.

Just as she was leaving the house, a sound caught her ear which caused her to come to a standstill, and listen intently.

"They're coming!" she exclaimed excitedly; then she sprang lightly into the saddle.

She looked very different now, even at close quarters, and anyone viewing her from a distance, would never have believed that she was a girl. Riding astride, as was her custom, and garbed in a man's coat, with the broad Stetson hiding her tell-tale curls, she indeed looked a handsome young man.

Guiding the horse towards the rear of the homestead, she brought it to a standstill and listened. The sound of the approaching hoof-beats grew louder and louder.

"It's time I made a move," she muttered, "or else they'll get too close."

She lightly spurred the horse as she spoke, causing it to spring forward, and the next moment they were travelling fast across the prairie.

As they issued from the cover the buildings had provided, a shout came faintly to her ears.

"There he goes!"

The words called up a smile of satisfaction on the girl's flushed face, and she turned in the saddle and glanced in the direction from which they came. She saw that a party of three of the mounted policemen had started in pursuit of her. She had no difficulty in recognizing Inspector Combrone as leader.

There was no doubt that they believed the fleeing figure before them, mounted on Burleigh's well-known riding horse, to be that of the owner. It was evident to them that he had been warned of their approach, and was making for the safety from pursuit which a crossing of the frontier into the States would provide. It was essential that they came up with him before he left Canadian territory.

With this end in view they set their horses along at their greatest speed.

The troopers' horses, however, were no match for that of the inspectors and the latter soon began to leave his subordinates behind. But try as he did, he was only able to gain very slightly on the flying figure in front of him.

Nelly was in high spirits, for she realized that she had put the police off the scent of the real fugitive, who would be able to evade them completely.

But when she gazed back and saw the figure of the inspector galloping along doggedly in her rear, she knew that she would have the greatest difficulty in shaking him off.

It was essential for many reasons that not only should he not capture her, but that he should not learn the trick she had played him.

But as time went on she knew the inspector was slowly but surely gaining. Up till then she had been riding in a bee-line for the frontier, but taking a different road to that which Burleigh would have traversed to reach the town to which she had directed him.

Suddenly she changed her direction slightly, and her pursuer was able to take a short cut to where she was now heading.

A low cry of satisfaction broke from the inspector's lips as he perceived where the fugitive was heading. He knew that a steep, but narrow gulch ran through the country at right angles to the line his quarry had now taken. It was evident to the police-officer that the fugitive was unaware of this, and that when he realized it he would have to check his horse, and his capture would then be easy.

But the girl knew exactly what she was doing, and was indeed acting on a suddenly conceived plan. She knew that, though the inspector's horse was swifter than the one she was riding, it was also carrying a much heavier weight. She also knew that the animal she bestrode was a perfect jumper, and as such horses are rare in Canada, she argued that in all probability that of her pursuer was not. The plan she intended carrying out was a very daring one, but she decided to attempt it, and if successful, she believed she would be able to bring the pursuit to an end.

The man riding behind was now making no special effort to come up with the fugitive; he had every confidence that the long race would terminate to his satisfaction.

But the fleeing figure in front kept straight on.

Nelly was within a hundred yards of the gulch, and was increasing her horse's speed. As the animal thundered towards the open chasm, she turned in the saddle for an instant to regard her pursuer.

The next instant she was steadying her horse for the awful leap.

At the place she had selected the distance across was some ten or twelve feet; there was a good take-off, and a satisfactory landing place on the other side; but if the horse failed to negotiate the jump, both it and its rider would go hurtling down to the rocky floor fifty feet below.

The girl knew what the penalty of failure would mean, but did not flinch. Her mouth closed firmly as the excited animal she bestrode dashed at the intervening space, and her grip tightened on the saddle. True to his reputation as a jumper, the good horse judged the right moment, rose, flashed through the air, and landed on the other side.

Checking his speed, Nelly turned a flushed face to see what her pursuer was doing.

The next instant a low cry of dismay broke from her lips, for Combrone was preparing his horse to take the dangerous leap. For an instant she thought of wheeling round, and by revealing her identity, prevent what might bring fatal results. But as she gazed, she realized that it was too late, and that anything she might do would only disconcert the horse and rider.

A shiver ran through her as the pursuing horse galloped at the dark gulch. She felt that she ought to have known that a man like Combrone would face death before relinquishing a task to which he had put himself.

The horse rose to take the leap, but though it just landed on the other side, it was only after a desperate struggle that it succeeded in not falling backwards into the gully.

With a deep sigh of relief, Nelly urged her horse forward once more, but the pursuer had gained considerably whilst she had checked her horse to watch.

Now that the danger to Combrone was passed, she remembered that she must at all costs outdistance him. Yet she realized that her chance of success had decidedly decreased, and that she would have the greatest difficulty in shaking off such a determined customer.

But if he was determined, so was she. Casting her glance over the prairie, she espied a stiff post-and-rail fence, and turned her horse in that direction.

It seemed to be the best thing that she could do, for there seemed no doubt now that the inspector's horse was faster than hers, and would eventually overhaul her. On the other hand, the animal she bestrode was a better jumper, and she determined to make as much of this asset as possible.

It was a mad race for the fence, and the inspector gained considerably as he spurred forward. But the fugitive was not yet beaten, and it was certain that she would reach the fence well ahead of her pursuer.

Combrone realized this, and as he gazed at the five-rail fence he knew that whatever the other might do, his own horse was incapable of negotiating the obstacle. But the inspector was not the man to let a wrongdoer escape whilst he had a means of preventing it. Quickly feeling for his revolver, he snatched it from the holster.

The girl was now not more than fifty yards from the fence, when in a spirit of bravado she turned in the saddle and waived a hand as though taking an ironical farewell of her pursuer. Then she raced fearlessly at the tremendous jump.

The horse was in the very act of taking-off, when the sharp crack of the inspector's revolver frightened it, and making only a half-hearted attempt to rise, it crashed heavily into the timber.

The girl was shot from the saddle over the obstacle as though she had been propelled by a catapult.

The inspector galloped up, and checking his horse, flung himself from the saddle. Hitching his panting animal to a post, he climbed the fence and sprang to where the figure of his late quarry lay motionless on the prairie.

"I hope he isn't——"

"My God! Nelly!"

Fearing the worst, he knelt beside her, and in an agony of remorse poured out a flood of words which only too truly indicated the huge love he bore for the unconscious girl.

But he became aware that the pallor of Nell's cheeks was giving place to a crimson flush, and suddenly her eyelids opened, and her blue eyes looked into his. Then a happy smile stole over her face as she sat up.

"Are you much hurt?" inquired the man in a trembling voice of anxiety.

"I don't think so," returned the girl, as he helped her to her feet.

"I was only stunned." Then, with a shaky laugh, she added: "Well, I suppose I'm your prisoner?"

"No, no!" protested the other.

For a moment the girl looked into the strong face of the man, then said quietly, with a tender smile:—

"I think I should like to be. You see, I heard."

* * * * *

Some six hours later the inspector was sitting in his office at Manatee. Fortune, which for so long had frowned on him, had at last taken a great turn in his favor.

Certainly, he had not succeeded in capturing Norman Burleigh, but other members of the gang were in custody; and the fact that the rancher had escaped was quite outshaded by the fact that the girl who aided him to do so had promised to become his wife. Indeed, he was at heart glad that Burleigh would not be doomed to a period in the penitentiary.

Suddenly there was a rap at the door, and an orderly entered.

"Mr. Norman Burleigh wishes to see you, sir."

"Burleigh?" gasped the other in surprise. Then added eagerly—"Show him in."

The next moment, Burleigh entered.

"I hear you've been looking for me, Combrone," he said quietly. "You've been laboring under some mistake, and I've come to put matters straight."

The inspector gazed at him keenly.

"D'you think you can?" he inquired eagerly. "Nothing would please me better."

"Sure!" said the other, taking the proffered chair in front of the police-officer. "I seem to be under the idea that you believe I am mixed up with the whisky-running outfit. Why you thought so in the first instance I don't know, but I can assure you that I am innocent of having anything to do with it. I can understand that now that whisky had been discovered at my place you should naturally suspect me, although I knew absolutely nothing about its being there. You as good as accused me the night you searched my wagon."

The inspector was thoughtful for a moment, then he sat up with a start.

"By jingo, I think I can see through the whole business now. Donnelly must have been in the swim, and put you under suspicion. That would also account for them sending me the note which let me see the running of a cargo."

"But why should they want to put suspicion on me?"

The inspector gave a laugh.

"They knew that if they did that they would run a less chance of being caught. That's all I can suggest. The man Dresden, who

was the head of the gang, turns out to be an escaped convict, which accounts for the false beard he was wearing."

"Is that so?" exclaimed the other. "I always thought there was something od dabout him. He always seemed so active for so old a man."

"He's about the same age as yourself," said the police-officer. "And I'm afraid it is not much to the credit of the Mounted Police that we did not unravel his disguise sooner. But, Burleigh, I owe you a thousand apologies for my suspicion of you. I hope you'll understand that what I did I only did in the interests of justice."

The two men's hands met in a hearty grip.

"And," said Norman Burleigh, "there's a bit more of misunderstanding I want to put right. Nelly Redwood and I have been the best of chums, but nothing else. I am engaged to the dearest girl in the world, who is coming out from England to marry me. And Nelly knows all about it—she is to be the bridesmaid."

"Perhaps," said Inspector Combrone. "Anyhow, she has told me what a jealous fool I've been."

Nelly was not bridesmaid after all, for a few weeks later there was a double wedding at Manatchee, when Burleigh married his fiancee from England, and Nelly was the other bride.

Mrs. Combrone has solemnly vowed that she will never again help suspected persons to escape from her husband's clutches, but asserts that if she hadn't done so on a celebrated occasion, she would probably not be so happy as she is now.



DERBY DICK

A Thrilling Story of the Race-Course

by the author of

"THE WHISKY RUNNERS."

CHAPTER I.

The Derby Favourite.

"Stick to him, youngster, stick to him for all you're worth," shouted Joe Lambert, excitedly.

The lad to whom the words were addressed seemed very small for the task he had in mind. He was perched on the back of a great raking thoroughbred, who was indulging in a series of big jumps which threatened to unseat the diminutive form of humanity on its back.

But Dick Carden, small though he was, possessed more nerve and strength than many who were thrice his age and size. Instead of getting excited and losing his head, he bore with his mount and kept his seat, to the great surprise of Joe Lambert, the trainer of the horse, and of a tall, military-looking gentleman, who had accompanied the latter to the Downs to see this horse, which he owned, do a gallop.

"Gad, Lambert!" said the owner, heartily, "you've got a jewel in that lad!"

"I believe I have, Colonel Fansham," replied the trainer, quietly.

"At any rate, he's the only one of my lads that can manage Starlight. By thunder! he's got the best of him now, though!" he went on, excitedly, as the horse, suddenly yawning his head from side to side, succeeded in getting the bit between his teeth, and was off across the rolling Downs in a flash.

The colonel emitted almost a groan of despair as he observed that his favorite was completely out of control and galloping directly towards the little village which skirted the famous training-grounds.

"My cob, quick!" he shouted to a stable-boy, who was holding the two steeds which Joe Lambert and he had been riding.

Lambert was ready on his cob, and in a second the colonel and he were speeding in the direction the runaway had taken.

They were both very white, for each had staked more than they cared to think of on Starlight winning the Derby, some six weeks ahead.

Yet they gloped their hardest after the fast-disappearing fugitive, buoyed up with the thought that in the "great game" they had each played so long, there was always hope while there was life.

Starlight was making towards the village of Bloxham, after taking a circular gallop on the Downs, and the two pursuing horsemen, observing the direction he was now galloping, were able, by taking a short cut, to follow him through the little scattered village, almost on his heels.

They saw, with a feeling of relief, that the principal street was devoid of traffic, and also that Dick Carden appeared to be regaining control over his mount. Then, with sigh of thankfulness, they perceived that he was slowly but surely bringing the excited animal to a stop.

A few moments more and he would be safe.

Then suddenly the toot of a motor-horn sounded ahead. A smothered expletive escaped the colonel's lips as he saw a great yellow car dash round a bend of the road ahead.

Starlight was still moving swiftly, and as the car passed him on the right side, he swerved nearly into the gutter on the left, and started off once again.

By a miracle, Dick Carden retained his seat, but he knew that his previous efforts had been in vain, for the mettlesome steed was now snorting with excitement.

The villagers had all turned out at the sound of the galloping hoofs, and when they saw that Colonel Fansham and his trainer were in pursuit, it began to dawn upon them that they were beholding an historical sight, and that the runaway must be the Derby favorite.

But no further mishap occurred, and the horse emerged from the village, so far unhurt, on to the Down on the further side.

It seemed as if the incident might close without accident; but it was now more evident than before that little Carden was unable to get the maddened animal under control.

The colonel and Lambert were still galloping, in a stern chase, when sud-

denly the latter shouted, hoarsely:

"The quarry!" and he pointed a hand to where, over a mile ahead, a wire fence shut off a great gulf in front.

And Starlight, the Derby favorite, was galloping straight for it—and certain death!

"My heaven!—the boy!" groaned the colonel, without a thought for the safety of his priceless horse, which meant wealth to him or ruin.

Then, at the top of his voice, he shouted:

"Jump off! Jump off!"

But it was impossible for Dick Carden to hear; at any rate, he took no heed of the colonel's orders for his safety.

Setting his teeth hard, he loosened the "off" rein, and seizing the other with both hands, the gallant lad pulled with all his strength. It was a mad—almost a fatal—thing to do, but he knew that it was the only chance of saving the horse—and, if he did not jump off, himself.

It answered. Starlight swerved to the left, and, as though sobered by the glimpse of the terrible leap he had so nearly taken, pulled up beside the low railings.

In a moment Dick Carden was off his back, and was standing by his head.

"Gallantly done, lad, gallantly done!" shouted the colonel, gruffly, as he rode up. "Why didn't you throw yourself off?" he inquired, looking down at the white face of the lad, who had just risked his own life to save that of the horse.

Dick Carden's rather pinched face lit up with a wan smile.

"Starlight's the Derby favorite, sir," he replied, with pride, as he stroked the neck of the still excited horse.

The colonel laughed a kindly laugh at the cool reply; then, pointing to the horse's off-hind fetlock, said moodily:

"I'm afraid it's a case of 'he was.' What d'you say, Lambert?"

Lambert followed the colonel's directing hand, and his face, which had brightened at beholding the safety of his charge, grew grave.

"He's cut it badly, sir, I'm afraid," he replied, running his hand cautiously down the trembling horse's leg. "We must get him home before it becomes stiff. It may be nothing," he ended briskly, and with an attempt at cheerfulness.

"We shall have to lead him. We mustn't run the risk of his getting away again," went on the trainer.

"No. Stick the lad up again," said the colonel quietly, noting the look of chagrin on Dick's face. "It was he who saved the situation," he ended heartily.

They made their way back across the Downs, but before they had reached the village, Starlight began to go lame behind.

As they made their way through the one street, known as Bloxham High Street, it appeared as though the whole of the inhabitants had turned out to learn the latest of the locally-trained champion.

"No damage done, I hope, colonel?" asked a great, rosy-faced, genial-looking man, saluting Colonel Fansham.

"What, Blingham! is that you? What are you doing in these parts?" asked the colonel, cordially, though in evident surprise.

"Well, I came to see Starlight gallop," returned Bill Blingham, the leviathan bookie of England, quietly.

"Well, you've accomplished the purpose of your visit, at any rate," laughed the colonel. "He came a pretty good bat through the village, eh? Laid him heavily?" he asked, curiously.

"So-so, colonel," replied the bookie, cautiously; "but if er—you want to back him I think I can accommodate you," he ended, with a trace of eagerness in his tone.

"I daresay you could, Blingham," returned the owner of the favorite, somewhat sarcastically. Then, as a somewhat reckless look came over his well-cut face, he jerked out: "What price will you lay me?"

"He was three to one last night, sir," said the bookie, tentatively.

"And what price will he be to-night, d'you think?" inquired the colonel. "Look at him now! Three legs and a swinger!"

It was only too true, for Starlight was scarcely touching the ground with his injured foot.

"Fives?" suggested Blingham, somewhat shamefacedly, as his eyes dwelt on the crippled favourite.

"Tens!" retorted the colonel, in a tone of decision.

"Very well, sir," replied Blingham, as though the price was preposterous, and he was only doing it to oblige his client, and for no gain to himself. "In hundreds, I suppose, sir?"

"No! Thousands!" snapped the colonel. "Is it a bet?" he inquired, grimly.

The genial face of the great bookie assumed a thoughtful expression, and

he glanced again at Starlight; then, apparently satisfied with his inspection, said, cheerfully:

"Ten thousand to one thousand! It's a bet, colonel!"

"That's the style!" replied the colonel, cheerfully, checking his cob as he spoke, and taking out an ivory-cased betting-book, in which he methodically entered the transaction.

While this had been going on, a hawk-nosed, dark, Hebraic-looking man came up and heard the end of the conversation. He had just emerged from the little telegraph office.

"Would you like to back your horse again, colonel?" asked this individual, eagerly, with a pronounced lisp.

The colonel glanced at the man for an instant, then, shutting his betting-book with a snap, said, freezingly:

"Not with you, Mr. Lomas! By the way, Blingham," he went on, cheerily, turning to the man with whom he had just made the transaction and completely ignoring the scowling visage of the other, "you might hold the cob for a moment, while I go in and send a wire. I'm going to scratch Starlight at once for the Two Thousand Guineas. It'll stop those hawks!" he shrugged his shoulder in the direction of Mr. Lomas, "from preying upon the ignorant public. He's probably got the news of the mishap to his pals in London by now!"

In a few moments he had despatched his message, and with a genial good-bay to Blingham was following in the tracks of his trainer and horse.

As he moved off, Lomas approached the leviathan.

"D'you want to lay off any of that?" he inquired.

"Not a penny, thanks!" replied Blingham, with a smile, "and what's more, I wouldn't mind losing a bit over the race to see the colonel win. He's a good-un, and as straight as a gun-barrel," ended the leviathan, warmly, glancing at the same time at his companion, whose face was not one to inspire confidence in its possessor's integrity.

"Well, it's easy to say that now, for Starlight's chance of winning is a trifle remote!" replied the other sarcastically.

"You never know till the numbers go up!" laughed Blingham. "But I must be getting back to town. Good-bay!" and he moved away.

Colonel Fansham caught up to Joe Lambert, and they made their way to the training stables.

"I've scratched him for the Two

Thousand," said the colonel, "and have sent a wire to Langham. Of course, Johnson's a good vet.' but Langham's admittedly at the top of the tree of his profession, and we mustn't spare any expense. What d'you think of the cut yourself?" he inquired anxiously.

It's very hard to say, colonel. He probably cut it against a stone while he was careering over that rough ground by the quarry. Of course, he'll be lame for certain for a few days at any rate; but if it isn't serious the stoppage in his work will do him little harm, for he's fitter at present than most in the race. Indeed," went on the trainer, in a hopeful tone, "I was going to give him a few days' easy work in any case."

"I've just backed him again," said the colonel, looking at his trainer curiously, as though to divine what he really thought of his proceedings.

"I hope not for much," said Joe Lambert, quickly.

"Took ten to one in thousands," retorted the colonel, with a light laugh.

The trainer did not reply for a moment. The he said, somewhat awkwardly:

"You're very different from other men, sir. Instead of backing him for more, they'd have hedged the bets they had already made before the news got about."

"Perhaps so," retorted the colonel, slowly. "But, d'you know, Lambert, I have a sort of presentiment that Starlight will win me my first and last Derby."

"Not your last, I venture to hope. You've got some good two-year-olds, and the yearlings."

"No. Win or lose this Derby, it will be the last time my colours are carried in public. I'm getting an old man, you know, and the doctors say my heart won't stand the strain, and if Starlight doesn't win—well, I shall be a very poor man," he ended, with an attempt at a laugh.

"I shall do my best," said Lambert, quietly.

"I can depend on that, Joe," returned the colonel, with warmth. "I'll canter on to my house. Let me know directly Langham arrives," he shouted over his shoulder as he went ahead.

"I'm afraid it's a bad job," muttered Joe Lambert, gravely, to himself, as the colonel rode away, and he followed the crippled Derby favourite into the spacious stable-yard.

CHAPTER II.

A Pair of Rogues.

When big Bill Blingham left him, Mr. Lomas immediately hurried away in the direction of the Horse and Hound Hotel, which was the rendezvous of the numerous inhabitants of Bloxham.

He passed quickly in, and made his way into the coffee-room, where a tall man of military bearing was sitting, idly glancing over the morning paper.

"Well?" inquired the latter, anxiously, springing to his feet as Lomas entered.

"It's all right, captain," returned Lomas quickly. "There'll be no need for any fine work of our own this time," he went on with a laugh. "He's as lame as ever we could wish, and has as much chance of seeing the starting-post as this chair," he ended, slapping the arm of the easy chair into which he had flung himself.

"Capital," murmured Captain Fansham. "But is the coast clear? Has my uncle taken his departure, I mean?" he ended with a smile.

"He went off with Joe Lambert to the stables," replied Lomas, shortly, as his eyes glittered evilly.

"Look here, Lomas; we can make a bit out of this. Wire your brother to lay Starlight for all he's worth for the Two Thous'. We'll go halves, of course, as it will be on our information."

"Too late, captain. Your uncle sent a wire to scratch him for the 'Guineas' as he passed through the village," returned Lomas, refraining from adding that he had himself also sent a wire which would, however, through the colonel's prompt action, prove of no value.

"Well, let's get back to town at once. There must be some way of making money out of this. We must back Warlock at once for all we can get on. Now Starlight is out of it we have nothing to fear. How did the old man take it?" he asked, curiously.

"Pretty coolly, I can tell you. Why, he backed it with Blingham to win him ten thousand while the horse was walking before his very eyes on three legs."

"What!" exclaimed the captain, sharply. "Then there can't be much wrong with the horse. If there's any doubt about the matter, we'd better adhere to our original plan."

"There's no need to be uneasy," replied Lomas, soothingly. "I think he only did it out of bravado. You know

what he is. I offered to lay him a price, too."

"Well?" inquired Captain Fansham, with a faint smile.

"He refused," returned Lomas, tartly.

"Hard lines," laughed the captain. "But we'll get a bit out of him yet some way or another before we've finished. I'll ring for my car. We may as well be starting."

In a few moments the car was before the door, and an hour and a half later the two worthies, who were so anxious that Starlight should not win the Derby, were seated in Captain Fansham's chambers in Piccadilly.

"Now, look here," the captain said, after they had both helped themselves to a cigar, "we must decide now what we are to do to-night. I propose that we go to the club separately, and you start at one end of the room and I at the other, then at an arranged signal between ourselves we start backing Warlock. Does that suit you?"

"Yes; that's all right. If we do it quietly we can get a few good wagers before the rest tumble to the fact that we are working a commission. But we want another to help us, and we would do better."

"That's so," admitted the captain. "D'you know anyone you can trust?" he asked, with a whimsical smile.

"There's my brother——" began Lomas.

"Out of the question!" retorted the captain, sharply. "He's too well-known as a book-maker, and directly he opened his mouth they'd cut the price."

"Well, do you know anyone you can trust?" inquired Lomas, testily.

"Don't think I do," returned the captain, with a grin.

"Then we must manage it by ourselves. How much shall we back him to win?"

"He's at twenty-five to one now. Can we get on five hundred each, do you think, at that price?"

"It might be done," replied Lomas, thoughtfully, "but we shall have to start very carefully. Of course, we must take what they'll lay as casually as we can, then when they begin to tumble to what we're after we go a bit faster, eh?"

"Gad! we'll gamble!" almost shouted the captain, his eyes blazing with the greedy excitement of a born gambler. Then he went on in a cooler tone: "But, remember, twenty to one is the shortest price we're to take."

"All right," muttered Lomas. "Then that's settled. What time will you put

in an appearance at the club, and what signal shall we arrange on to start operations?"

"I'll be there at nine-thirty. You had better be there before that; then, when I enter the room, I shall be smoking a cigarette, which I shall throw away. Now, listen carefully. I shall then put a cigar in my mouth, and directly you see me strike a match and light it you must begin. I shall be talking to one of the bookies when I do it. Do you tumble?" hen ended.

"Yes; that seems a good idea. We ought to do it all right, for, although I've been a commission agent all these years, I've never taken very much out of the ring, and they don't regard me as very dangerous," he ended, with a laugh, as he rose, and, picking up his hat, moved towards the door.

"Remember to be at the 'Polford' before nine-thirty," said the captain, as his companion departed.

As soon as Lomas had left the room Captain Fansham went to a little bureau, and, unlocking it, took out a sheaf of letters. Selecting the topmost one, he sat down and perused it carefully.

The occupation did not seem to afford him any pleasure, for an ugly scowl formed on his handsome but rather dissipated face.

"Hum!" he muttered, thoughtfully. "She gives me till to-morrow to weigh in with fifty of the best, or she'll blab. Gad! I wonder if she could really do me any harm? It's so long ago that her word would scarcely be any proof. Yet it might make things awkward."

He sat for a few moments wrapt in deep thought. Then suddenly he sprang to his feet with energy.

"I'll go and see the lad, hanged if I don't," he muttered viciously. "For all I know he may be dead by now; it's thirteen years since I last heard of him," he ended, in callous tones, as he seized his hat. "One moment; I've forgotten the address."

He started to search the bureau again, and in a few moments found an old pocket-book. Glancing hastily through this, he paused at a page which he almost immediately tore out.

"Alfred Dawkins, 17, Ching Street, Camden Tom," he read. "I wonder if he's moved? Sure to have done, I suppose; but there's no harm in trying."

So saying, he hurried downstairs, and in a few moments was speeding in a taxi-cab towards Camden Town.

He paid off the cab when he reached

the Cobden statue, and pursued his way on foot.

He found Ching Street without much difficulty, and in a short while came to No. 17.

It was a very squalid district, and the house to which he had come was rather more ill-favored looking if anything than the remainder.

He, however, knocked at the door.

In a few moments it was opened and a very stout woman of middle age presented herself. She looked at her visitor suspiciously as she inquired:

"Wot may you be wantin'?"

"Does Alfred Dawkins live here?" inquired the captain.

"Maybe he does, maybe he doesn't," was the non-committing reply.

"Which means to say he does," said Captain Fansham, producing half a crown and handing it to the good dame, who softened towards him immediately.

"Alf ain't in now," she said, civilly, "but if you cares to sit down for a moment, I'll slip round to the 'Horse-shoe' and see if I can find him."

"Are you Mrs. Dawkins?"

"I am that, sir," replied the woman, with a trace of pride in her tone.

"Well, then, I think you'll do as well. Yes, I will come in for a few moments."

The woman led the way into a clean little parlour, and wiping the seat of a chair with her apron, asked her visitor to sit down.

The captain did so, and Mrs. Dawkins, with arms akimbo, stood waiting to learn his business.

"You had charge of a little boy," said the captain suddenly. "I should like to see him," he ended, abruptly.

The woman started at the words, and seemed for a moment a bit disconcerted, then said in a decisive tone:

"It's Alf as you wants to see," and, before the captain could remonstrate, she had whisked past him and out of the room.

In about five minutes she returned with her lord and master. Alf Dawkins was also a very large specimen of humanity, and although he was a rough-looking customer, he had an honest appearance.

"Wot can I do for you, gov'nor?" he asked.

"You're Alf Dawkins, I suppose?"

"Yus!"

"Thirteen years ago a boy was left in your charge?"

"Wot's that got to do with you, gov'nor?" asked Dawkins, in rather a sulky and suspicious tone.

"Not very much, but I should like

to see him. I might find him a job, you know."

"Well, you can't then!" returned the other, stolidly.

"Why not? He's not dead, is he?" asked the captain, in eager tones.

Alf Dawkins looked at him curiously.

"No. He ain't dead, as I knows on," he replied, slowly.

The eager look died out of Captain Fansham's eyes as he asked, somewhat testily:

"Then where is he?"

"That's more than I can say. He did a skip these two years, come Derby Day."

"Did what?"

"Lighted out. Cleared. Went off!" exclaimed Dawkins, with a pitying smile at the other's ignorance.

"Where to?"

"It's more than I can tell you, gov'n'r. He had a good time here, although I had to belt him now and ag'in. He weren't a bad boy, by no means, and I and the missus often misses the little beggar, and so does the dorg," he ended, quietly, pointing to a retriever dog which had entered with him and was now sniffing at the captain suspiciously.

"That we does!" sniffed Mrs. Dawkins, carrying her apron to her eyes. "And Sooty, there, he pined so after he'd gone that we were like to lose him, too," she ended.

"Did you make any efforts to find the lad?" asked the captain, after a moment's thought.

"Yus. I went and saw the police; but they could do nothin' to help us."

Captain Fansham rose with a satisfied look on his face.

"Well, look here, Dawkins, if you should run across the lad again, just let me know. Bring word to me at this address."

He was taking a card from his case, when suddenly he changed his mind, and opening his pocket-book, wrote on a leaf the name and address of Lomas.

Tearing out the leaf, he handed it to Dawkins.

"Now take care of that and do as I tell you," he said, handing the big man a sovereign.

Alf Dawkins' eyes sparkled at the sight of the gold, and he replied with warmth:

"That I will, sir; as soon as ever I set eyes on the lad, I'll let you know."

"Very good, Dawkins. Good-day."

"Good-day missis!" and the captain made his way out into the street.

He was on good terms with himself, for he now knew that the lad whom

he was seeking could not be produced by the woman who had demanded fifty pounds from him; and that, therefore, there was no need for him to pay this "hush-money."

It was a great relief to him for many reasons, not the least of which was that he was in want of ready cash, and he would have had difficulty in finding the sum required.

But Captain Fansham, since he had left the army somewhat hurriedly ten years before, had always managed to keep his head above water by some means or other. On the Turf he had met with varying fortune, but it was the card-table that had really allowed him to continue his reckless life. He was known as a lucky player, and it was hinted by many that his luck was not altogether due to good fortune, but to his clever manipulation of the cards.

He had long passed out of the society to which he was born, and now, though he belonged to one or two sporting clubs, there were but few of at all.

His old set who would recognize him

Colonel Fansham, his uncle, refused to have anything to do with him, although, by law, he was at the colonel's death entitled to the valuable entailed estates of that gentleman.

And now the captain hoped to bring off the greatest gamble of his life. His colt, Warlock, had satisfactorily answered a trial which proved him to be, in his owner's estimation, the best of his year, with the possible exception of his uncle's horse, Starlight.

But now Starlight was injured he felt that nothing could prevent him from winning the much-coveted Derby, and at the same time landing him such a huge stake as would put him on his legs for good and all.

After leaving the neighborhood where he had interviewed Alf Dawkins, he made his way West, and having treated himself to a good dinner, sauntered off to the Polford Club, where he had arranged to meet Lomas.

When he entered the room reserved for betting purposes with a cigarette in his mouth, according to his arrangement with his confederate, there was a hum of excitement. He wondered at this, for generally at that hour things were very quiet.

"What's the matter, Gibson?" he asked a penciller at the end of the room.

"There's been a big commission worked for the king's horse, captain,"

replied Felix Gibson "He's virtually first favourite now."

"What? You don't mean to say Sea Lord has been backed?" said Captain Fansham, in genuine surprise.

"Well, try to back it yourself, and see what price they'll offer you," returned the bookie, grimly.

"Not I!" replied the captain, with a grimace. "I've lost enough already over the race. My uncle's horse is lame, you know," he ended, in a tone of annoyance.

The bookie looked at him curiously.

"Had you backed it, captain?" he asked.

"To my sorrow," replied the other.

"There's no chance of its getting round by the day?" asked the bookie, quickly.

"There's just an off chance," replied the captain, in such a tone as to lead the bookie to suppose that he was making the mishap out to be worse than it was. "You don't want to lay Starlight by any chance?" he inquired casually.

The bookie, always suspicious, like the rest of his profession, believed he was obtaining, in a roundabout way, very valuable information about the dethroned favorite.

"I can lay you four to one," he said with gravity.

"Don't! you might hurt yourself," returned the captain. "Why, they're calling ten to one over there."

Felix-Gibson looked perplexed at this.

"Well, can I lay you anything else?" he enquired.

"I don't feel much in the mood for gambling to-night," returned Fansham, nicking a cigar and placing it between his teeth. "By the way, though," he drawled, in a scarcely interested voice, "what price are you laying Warlock?"

"Warlock?" repeated Ggbson, referring to his book. "I can lay you twenty-fives, captain," he ended, in a businesslike tone.

"No good to me, Gibson," laughed the captain. "I should want thirty-three to one," he went on.

So saying, he made a movement to pass on.

"Very well, captain, thirty-threes it is!" he said, eagerly. "How much shall we say?"

Captain Fansham's hand travelled to his waist-coat pocket as his eyes glanced down the room till they encountered those of Lomas.

"Well, how much, captain?" inquired Gibson again, impatient to complete the transaction.

"Eh?" ejaculated Fansham, with a start, as though he had forgotten the subject under discussion. "What were we talking about? Oh, I remember—Warlock. You offered thirty-threes?" he said, striking a light. "I'll take it in hundreds!" he said, slowly, as he lit his cigar.

Then Captain Fansham moved quietly but quickly from bookie to bookie. He inquired the price of Warlock in casual tones, and made bets in almost an absent-minded manner.

Then suddenly there was a buzz of excitement, for at last it was understood that a commission had been worked.

A large number of backers were present, and they made a rush to back Warlock, but the bookies would not now lay more than ten to one.

In the meanwhile Fansham and Lomas had retired to the smoke-room for a whisky-and-soda, and to compare notes. They each seemed in excellent spirits.

"Jingo! that was smart work, eh?" said Fansham, with a laugh, as he added up the list of bets they had each made. "We've got it on at an average of twenty-five to one. Better than I expected."

"Yes, we can't grumble," admitted Lomas. "Is that all you're going to have on?" he asked, turning to his companion.

"No fear! but it is enough to go on with. There's plenty of time between now and the day, and one never knows what may happen in that time," he ended, rather moodily. "Well, I'm off! Good-night!" continued Fansham, rising.

He made his way through the room again, where the odds were still being called. The excitement had not yet subsided, and he was asked for information about his colt, by several of his betting acquaintances, but he only laughed, and said that he thought he had an outside chance of winning.

He was just making his way to the door when suddenly he came to a dead stop, in sheer amazement, for, entering the room, his face, radiant with a great joy, was his uncle.

The sight sent a chill thrill of fear through him. What did it mean? Was Starlight, after all, not badly injured?

His uncle appeared not to see him, but made his way along the room. All eyes were upon him, for he had never frequented the club.

The colonel, however, made his way straight to where the huge form of

Billy Blingham was seated in a chair.

"Good evening, colonel," said the bookie. "Want to back Starlight again?" he asked.

"I've half a mind to," replied Colonel Fansham, "but I want to see you privately, Blingham. As soon as you are at liberty, could you spare me a few moments?"

"With pleasure, colonel!" replied the bookie, rising, and leading the way into the deserted smoke-room.

CHAPTER III.

A Great Surprise.

Colonel Fansham had not been at his house very long before he got a message from Joe Lambert to say that Langham, the veterinary surgeon, had arrived. He therefore started for the stables again, which adjoined the little villa which he was accustomed to live in when at the training quarters.

Langham proceeded to make a thorough examination of Starlight's injured limb, the owner and trainer waiting anxiously for the decision.

"Well," asked the colonel, quietly, "is it fatal? I mean as far as his running in the Derby is concerned?"

"Not a bit of it, colonel!" replied the vet., heartily. "It means, certainly, that he'll have to go several days without a gallop, but perhaps that won't do him any harm. Joe, here, tells me he is very forward in condition."

"That's good news, anyhow, Langham. You really think it is not serious?"

"Not so far, at any rate. It's a clean cut, and will soon heal, and I'll stake my reputation that it'll be all right in a week to ten days."

The colonel was delighted at this assurance, and Joe Lambert's honest face betrayed the relief which it had given him.

After Langham had taken his departure, having given Lambert directions for the treatment of his charge, the colonel turned to the trainer.

"Now, what can I do for the lad?" he asked, abruptly.

"Who d'you mean, sir? Dick Carden?" inquired the trainer.

"Of course. If it hadn't been for him Starlight would be lying at the bottom of the quarry at this moment. Just send for him, will you?"

In a few moments Dick appeared, and was standing nervously in front of Colonel Fansham.

"Look here, my lad," said the colonel, kindly. "You risked your life this afternoon to save that of my horse. Now what can I do for you? Is there anything that you want specially?"

Dick appeared considerably confused at the question, then suddenly his face lighted up, and he replied, impulsively, though in a tone as if asking a great deal too much:

"I should like to ride in a race, sir," he replied.

"Ride in a race, eh?" said the colonel genially. "Well, that's not much to ask. Certainly you shall. Let him have a mount on old Humming Top at the Epsom Spring Meeting, Lambert; he's got a light weight in that sprint, you know."

"Very well, colonel," said the trainer, and Dick, mumbling his thanks, went off overjoyed at the prospect of riding in public.

"He seems a decent lad," said the owner of Starlight, gazing after the youngest as he moved away.

"He is a good lad," said Lambert, warmly, "and if he hadn't asked you to let him ride I was going to suggest giving him a chance. He's as plucky as they make 'em, has good hands, and doesn't lose his head. I wish I had a few more like him," he ended, ruefully, "for good stable-boys are very hard to procure."

"I must do something more for him, though," muttered the colonel, musingly; then added, quickly: "Hallo! here's a telegraph boy. He's evidently got something for me, as he came from the house."

The colonel took the buff envelope from the bearer, and seeing it was addressed to him, opened it. As his eyes rested on the flimsy sheet of paper, his face took on a look of the gravest perplexity.

He read the message it contained half aloud, as though trying to understand its meaning. He read:

"Please come at once to 19, Shrimp Street, Peckham. Marion Glover wishes to make a confession to you. She is dying. No time to lose."

The wire was signed by the vicar of a parish in the East-end.

"Glover! Glover!" repeated the colonel over to himself. "I wonder what it means? I must go, anyway," he muttered; then, in a louder voice: "I've got to run up to London, Lambert. I may be back to-morrow, but cannot be sure. Keep me posted as to how Starlight goes on. Good-day," and

the next moment the colonel was hurrying towards his own house.

In a few moments he was on the way to the station in his motor-car, and an hour later was standing at the door of the house in Peckham to which he had been called.

A clergyman answered his knock, and bade him enter.

"I'm so glad you've come!" he said, gravely. "I'm afraid she won't last much longer, and she seems very anxious to relieve her mind of something that is worrying her. Will you come upstairs now?" he asked. "The doctor is with her," he ended.

"I—I can't think who it is," stammered the colonel. "I don't know anyone of the name of Glover."

"She was a nurse to your son, she says," replied the parson.

"Ah! I think I remember her now, but I can't think what she can want with me. However, of course, I will see her as she wishes it. Please lead the way."

In a few moments he was standing at the bedside of the dying woman, and the doctor, with a whispered caution not to unduly excite the invalid, withdrew. The clergyman, however, remained, and he had brought with him materials for writing.

For a moment there was silence, then the woman spoke in a weak, quavering voice:

"You don't recognize me, sir," she said to the colonel; "but if you remember, I was nurse to your little boy."

"I remember you now," said the colonel, quietly.

The woman was silent for a few moments, then said to the clergyman:

"Please take down what I say." Then, turning to the colonel, she continued: "I am glad I have time to make what amends I can. I did you a terrible wrong, sir, when I was employed by you to look after your son."

"Yes, yes," said the colonel soothingly. "But why recall these painful facts? The poor boy died, he ended, brokenly.

"No, no!" cried the woman, in vehement excitement. "He didn't die!"

"What!" cried the colonel hoarsely; then continued, in a gentler tone: "You must not excite yourself; but you know he died, and I saw him buried."

"No, no, sir!" persisted the woman,

plaintively. "It wasn't your son that died. It was another child that I had changed into his place."

The colonel started violently at these words, and a look of hope passed over his grave face. The next moment it had gone, and given place to one of incredulity. The woman noticed it, and she continued earnestly:

"You don't believe me, sir, but you must!" she said, with such vehemence that her words carried conviction, wild though they seemed.

Then she went on in a weak voice and slowly:

"I feel I haven't time to tell you all, but what I say is true. When your wife died I had complete management of the baby, and you scarcely ever saw it during your wife's illness. Well, I was bribed to exchange it for a child who was already dying. I did so, and the child died, but the other child, which was yours, lived."

The colonel's face was very white now.

"Who bribed you to make the exchange?" he asked, in a low tone.

"I will not tell you that," replied the woman, in a feeble voice.

"Tell me where my child is?" pleaded the colonel.

"I do not know," murmured the woman, and even as she spoke they could see she would not last much longer.

"She had better sign this," whispered the parson, and he placed the document before her.

The woman made an extraordinary effort, and succeeded in scribbling her name at the bottom of her statement. Then she sank back, and they thought she was gone.

Suddenly she started up, and exclaimed, excitedly:

"Why shouldn't I tell you who it was who bribed me? You'll never find your son unless I do. I'll tell you!" she cried, almost fiercely. "It was——" But before the name she wished to pronounce could pass her lips, she fell back exhausted by her superhuman effort to speak.

"Who was it?" inquired the colonel, gently.

But no answer came to his question, and after a few moments he and the clergyman summoned the doctor, who was waiting outside.

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