

THE SHEARER'S TAKE-DOWN.

A SPORTING STORY.



IF JACK BOLTON woke one morning a few weeks before Christmas with a frightful headache. He sat up in bed, and casting his eyes round the somewhat scanty furniture of his room at the bank endeavoured to recollect what day it was and what on earth he had been up to the night before. His degrees he remembered first that it was Sunday morning (thank Heaven!), second that the night before had naturally enough been Saturday night, and that there had been a meeting of local racing men for the purpose of arranging the preliminaries of the Christmas races. Jack remembered having gone there, and of having assisted at the deliberations of the assembled sports. He also clearly remembered having made a brilliant address on the propriety of giving a race ball, and on his proposal being carried by acclamation he had invited the whole meeting to drink at his expense. Further proceedings were rather misty, and it required some careful tracing to follow his movements from one event to another through the haze of tobacco smoke and the fumes of alcohol which seemed to have settled in his head, and to have closed down on the last few hours of his life like a thick fog. Suddenly Mr Bolton jumped from his bed with an oath—only to throw himself back on it again with a groan—for flashing through the haze of last night's proceedings came the awful recollection that he had made a most idiotic wager of a level £200 with Mick Flannagan, the sporting publican of the place, that he would find a horse in the district to beat his (he said Mick's) crack mare Sheelah on Boxing Day, the date fixed for the Christmas meeting.

Now Mr Jack Bolton, though of the mature age of twenty-two years, and occupying the exalted position of accountant in a country bank, knew as little about horse-racing as he did about tiger-shooting, believing both to be dangerous amusements, with little to choose between them. Mr Michael Flannagan, on the other hand, was forty-five years of age, a publican, strongly suspected on account of his name and accent of having been born on Erin's Isle, and a thorough adept in all the sharp practices and clever devices necessary to ensure a successful career in the lower class of sporting circles. He was a good judge of a horse's capabilities, an excellent trainer, and certain to do all he knew to make money by means either fair or foul. Among his accomplishments he was a champion at poker, and at cribbage he was considered invincible, his luck, according to the opinion of the innocent uninitiated, being something extraordinary. In fact, fortune seemed to favour Mr Flannagan in everything, so he was seldom known to lose, but when he did he paid his money down on the spot. This was just the sort of man Jack had bet with; and, when two men so differently endowed make a wager, it is not difficult to point to the probable loser. On Bolton's mind on that unhappy Sunday morning descended the blackness of desolation, for he saw no hope of winning; indeed, he did not know where to get a horse good enough in the district—and, if he lost! Well, he had not £50 of his own in the whole world, and Flannagan was just about as likely to let him off as an alligator would be to let go his hold of a fat Chinaman. Two hundred pounds is not much of a bet as bets go nowadays, but it is a device of a thing for a man to pay when his father, like Jack's, is a country parson with a large family of younger children depending on him, and who has old-fashioned notions about the wickedness of betting at all, and strong opinions of the ungentlemanly conduct of a man who makes wagers which he has no means of paying in the event of luck going against him. There was also the awe-inspiring general manager to be considered, a man with his cold, gentlemanly way of intimating that he would advise Mr Blank to forward his resignation to the company, as he had rarely heard of a young gentleman who is in the habit of making heavy bets on sporting events attaining any position of importance in banking business. All these reflections passed through Bolton's mind as he lay gazing upon his bed, and although there were probably men in Australia in much deeper trouble and distress on that sunny Sunday morning, poor Jack did not think so, and was about as completely miserable as any young fellow could wish his worst enemy to be.

After indulging for a considerable time in vain regrets, and heartily cursing his folly and the drink which caused it, he rose, dressed himself with shaking hands, and giving a last look at his dissipated reflection in the glass, Jack betook himself, headache and all, into the street of the small town and off to his particular chum's quarters at the rival bank. Bolton's chum was one Parker, a man a year or two older than Jack, and ages more experienced. He was, taking him all in all, a very good specimen of his class, kindly, easy tempered, not deficient in pluck, with an amount of confidence in and respect for himself closely bordering on conceit, which is not altogether a bad feature of character, for it tends to keep the youth from doing that which is questionable or that may appear so. Parker, unlike Jack, had spent Saturday evening at the doctor's singing den with the medico's pretty sister. He was up and dressed when Jack arrived, and although not of a very religious turn of mind, he was whistling part of the clinch service while looking through some old letters in his desk.

"Hallo, Jack, old chap, how goes it?"

"Good morning, Parker."

"What's up, Jack? You look a bit off! Been looking on the wine when it is the colour of Scotch whisky, eh?"

"Parker, I am afraid I got tight last night, and, what is worse, I have made an awful mess of it—made a stupid wager for a large amount with Flannagan, and upon my soul I feel inclined to shoot myself for being a confounded ass."

"Steady, old man; don't talk rot. You are sandy, though: to just take a sup of J.R.D., and let me hear all about it. Two heads are better than one, anyhow."

Jack did as he was told, and related as far as he could remember the events of the night before. There was not much to tell. After the meeting, he had with one or two others accompanied Mr Flannagan to his hotel, and there, under the influence of alcoholic beverages, he became, like many more young men when tipsy, inflated with ideas of his own importance; and if under the circumstance he had been taken down by Mr Flannagan for a moderate amount, it would have served him right. Two hundred pounds, however, was beyond a joke, and so thought Parker, who remarked, "A man must pay for being a fool, the same as for any other luxury, but they have overcharged you, old fellow, and we must get the price reduced if possible."

"I suppose," said Jack, "there's no chance of Flannagan—"

"Drawing the bet?" Parker interrupted. "No, I think not, and it would not look well to humble yourself to ask him, but I'll sound him quietly and let you know. I am afraid he knows that your governor would sacrifice everything to save you the disgrace of the rack, which would be inevitable if the yarn gets to the chief's ears, and I can just tell you quietly that Flannagan, from some cause or other, is hard up just now. Some of his paper came back from below the other day, and it took all he knew to fix it up."



MCKENZIE WENT AN EXPERIMENTAL TRIAL GALLOP.

After an hour's further discussion, during which Jack Bolton did not receive much consolation, but still the mere fact of having confided his trouble to another seemed to have lightened his heart, he walked home with a more jaunty step than he had walked out.

According to promise Parker called on Mr Flannagan, at the Harp of Erin Hotel, next day. He found the gentleman sitting in front of his bar reading an account of the latest international prize fight, and evidently just after breakfast. The hotel had a strong odour of stale beer and whisky. Several works of art adorned the walls, and consisted of portraits of celebrated race horses, a picture of the great fight between Heenan and Tom Sayers, with key to same, and a few coloured cartoons from some political print representing the bloody-minded Saxon in every possible variety of ignominious disgrace, with a light-hearted gentleman in a red waistcoat and knee-breeches triumphantly dancing on his dishonoured opponent.

After exchanging the usual compliments, Parker cautiously approached the object of his mission—very cautiously indeed, but it was no use. Flannagan came to the point at once and said, "I suppose he wants to cast off. Is that his little game?"

Parker replied, "Well, you know the young gentleman was drunk. There is no doubt of that, Mick, and if he loses I don't know how he is to pay."

"See here, now," rejoined Mick, "if I lose I'll pay. If he loses, he jabsers, I'll make him pay or leave his billet. 'Pretty sort of a man he is to come blowing around making wagers and wantin' to crawl out of them. The let's made, signed, and witnessed, and by all the goats in Kerry he'll have to stand to it."

This was final. There was no hope from Mr Flannagan, and Parker left the Harp of Erin with a secret feeling that he would like to test the durability of Flannagan's neck.

It wanted but then three weeks to Boxing Day, and Bolton had abandoned all hope, and had by Parker's advice written home to his father a full account of his foolish transaction. He had received a reply, a sorrowing letter, to say that by the day mentioned the money would be at his disposal, but that in order to procure its sacrifice would have to be made; and all this added to Jack's previous load of self-reproach to such an extent that a speedy exit from this world would not have had the ordinary amount of terror for him. He was young, full of life and health, but he realised the disgrace that had overtaken him. If he could but obtain a horse to beat Flannagan—but then it must be owned by someone in the district, and where was there an animal good enough to live a mile with Sheelah with Sat. up. He tried to relieve his gloomy feelings by

a long walk, and Jack struck out from town, past the mines on the hill, and away across the flat beyond the creek towards the station. It is a fact—and anyone who will pause to reflect on his own past will easily remember instances of it in his career—that when things are bad, and apparently at their very worst, something happens to show a man the way out. Often he takes the right road, without knowing why, and on looking back he cannot remember just where the turning point was nor what led him to it, the incident was in itself so trivial. It was so in this case. Jack had wandered on and on, wrapped in gloomy thoughts, taking little notice of anything, until he had reached the crossing-place of a small shallow creek, about two miles from town. Here the trees formed a pleasant shade, and the clear water gushing over the little gravelled shallow crossing sounded pleasant and refreshing after the experience of the hot, dusty road. He stopped to drink, and stood looking at the water and at the road beyond where it ascended the opposite bank and on towards Rosella Station. As he stood thus a sudden breath of air—a tiny summer whirlwind—lifted a stray envelope lying on the opposite side, and, after playing with it in a purposeless manner, brought it across the yard or two of water and laid it gently at Jack's feet. There was nothing startling in this, but Jack's fairy god must surely have been in that wind, for the torn envelope was the finger post that directed him to turn off from the road to ruin. Scarcely thinking what he was doing, he stooped and picked it up. It had evidently contained a Christmas card, and was from England, addressed to "Henry Dixon, Esq., Rosella Station, Woodville, near Queensland, Australia." Vague no doubt the address was, but as near as the good people of England usually get to a colonial address. "I thought Dixon was in Scotland," said Jack to himself. "Lucky beggar! Young, good looking, plenty of money, he can go where he likes. Haven't seen him since he, Parker, and myself were at the Grammar School together. Wonder if he remembers us. Our ways have diverged since then; he used to go in hot for cricket, and I believe he has been a successful racing man since, and, good heavens! he might have a horse that could beat Sheelah." Back rushed Jack to town with all the impetuosity of youth to impart his new idea to Parker.

It was rather a dash to his feelings to see how coolly Parker took the matter. "He may help you, Jack, old man. He was a good old sort at school; but men alter when they have faced the world for even a few years, and you must remember he left some time before you, and may have forgotten us both. However, keep your tail up, we'll try." They soon ascertained that Dixon was at Rosella, one of several stations he owned, and would stay there over the Christmas holidays. There was no time to be lost, so the two friends set out at once to see him. It was evening when they reached Rosella, and as they rode up to the gate of the home paddock the sun was setting behind the western hills, throwing the veranah of the home station house into delightful shadow. The figure of a man without coat or waistcoat was seen to climb down from the hammock and take a survey of the intruders through a field glass; and by the time they had reached the garden gate, the figure—Harry Dixon himself—was there to meet them. Did he know them? He did, and was boyishly glad to see them. It is not the pleasant flower-strewn paths of life that sour a man, but the hard, uphill struggle against fate, and the latter had not been Dixon's experience. He was the same Dixon as of old; and, after a few preliminary references to old times and friends, Parker, in his usual straightforward manner, told of young Bolton's fix. Dixon looked grave and said, "It is awkward. I am almost a stranger here myself, Jack, and you must have the money to stake before when?"

"Before this day week."

"And you absolutely have not anything with four legs to give you even a show for your money?"

"No, not even a billygoat."

"Nice young goat you must be yourself. What, by all that's wonderful, could you have been dreaming about?"

"I was tight, Dixon—tight as a bottle."

"Then you had better let drink alone in the future, my boy. I could hardly imagine a man being such an owl if he had allowed a whole distillery. However, that is not the question now. You two stop here all night. Say no more about it and we will try to hit on some plan in the morning. Dixon had already an idea, small as undeveloped, but likely to grow into something tangible. His principal idea in asking them to stay all night was that he might see whether Jack Bolton's trouble was the result of a sheer accident and unlikely to happen again, or whether he was one of those unlucky people who are apparently always falling into pits to be dragged out by their friends. Happily the result of his observations that night was satisfactory. Jack forgot his trouble, but was not unduly merry, and he showed when speaking of old friends that his heart was in the right place, and that it would be no end of pity to let him go down. Next morning just after daybreak Dixon walked into his bedroom and said:

"Jack! I will try to pull you through this fix, but I want your word of honour that it is the last of the kind you will indulge in."

"I give you my word, Dixon, whether you help me or not."

"That will do then. This Flannagan appears to me to be a mean dog to take advantage of your being in liquor, and although I want to help you first, I want to take him down as well, just as a lesson, but the immediate question to consider is, what about the horse that is to be the 'take-down.' Now, listen. I will lend you £150 to relieve your old governor, and I believe I have a horse on the station that I am pretty certain is a tier. I got him from a shearer about eight months ago. There is no mystery about him that I suppose will never be cleared up. 'Martindale,' of the *Town and Country Journal*, one of the most experienced sporting writers in Australia, entertains a fancy that he is identical with a celebrated Ballarat horse which was backed to win a ton of money on the Melbourne Cup. That horse, when under a cloud, caused by the dishonesty of his owner, not himself, was spirited away. It is impossible to say whether this fellow is the same, as not only have the brands been altered, but he has in several other ways been disguised