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# ➤ A RACE WITH RUIN. ➤

By HEADON HILL.

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Author of "Guilty Gold," "The Queen of Night," "By a Hair's Breadth," "The Peril of the Prince," Etc.

## CHAPTER XXXVII.

## WILL THERE BE TIME?

Disappointed, though not surprised, at finding the window of her new prison guarded from the path below, Nance strained her ears to catch the conversation that was going on. Failing to overhear a single word, she sat down and waited. Brunnagem Jen and Ted the Pounder, she told herself, were not the sort of "hardy annuals" to remain watching in the open air all night. Something would happen before then.

Something did happen, of which we already have cognizance. The glow in the southern sky from the rocket suddenly illumined the room, and she caught a glimpse of the streak of fire as it sank behind the tree-tops. Only a faint echo of the commotion produced in the dining-room below reached her, but it was enough to show that the rocket had some sort of significance for her captors.

Then silence supervened, and she ventured to look from the window to see if the pugilists were still on the path below. They were not, but a broad band of light shooting from the French window on the ground floor showed up in clear relief the boots of some one sitting just within the room. Escape by means of the sturdy ivy stems was not yet practicable. It would be impossible to reach the ground without incurring the observation of the unseen man underneath.

Despair was claiming her again when a strange noise, or, rather, succession of noises, at the door of the room drew her attention. First there was the scraping of the key as it turned in the lock, presumably unlocking the door, as it had been previously locked. Then followed the turning of the handle in an attempt to enter the room, which was futile, because she had shot the inner bolts. After that the faint drumming of fingers on the panels reached her probably a request for admission. And, finally, when she met all these advances with absolute silence, the patter of receding footsteps on the landing was distinctly heard.

Ignorant as to who her unknown visitor could be, Nance was congratulating herself on having had the power of keeping him or her from entering, when a novel sound from a fresh direction filled her with a vague thrill of impending change. It was the rumble of carriage wheels from the side of the house, and, running to the window, she was just in time to catch a glimpse of the brougham lamps as the vehicle turned into the drive from the stable-yard.

Could it be that her enemies had evacuated the citadel?

A glance downwards at the protruding boots showed that one at least had been left behind, but, encouraged by the hope that at least the garrison had been weakened, Nance ventured to solve the mystery of the door. Cautiously drawing the bolts, she found that in truth the door had been unlocked, and that she was no longer confined to one room.

Half fearful that it might be a trap to lure her to unknown perils, she ran back and procured her hat and stole down the unlighted stairs. The hall also was in darkness, but she shuddered as through the open door of the lamp-lit dining-room she caught sight of the broad back of Houdigan seated at one of the windows. Avoiding the front door, which would have brought her within range of his vision, she groped her way through dark and mouldy passages to a tradesman's entrance in the long-disused servants' quarters. The

door, which was the one by which Mother Fury and her companions had beaten a retreat, stood open, and, with a sob of thankfulness, Nance found herself a free woman.

Fearful of surprises, she made her way along the tortuous, overhung drive, and turned into the lane through the iron gates just five minutes before Tidmarsh, and six before Inspector Croal turned out of it. She did not meet them, since they both came from the opposite direction to that towards which she set her face.

For her first thought, now that she had fluttered from the snare, was whether there would be time to warn the people at the training-stable of the scheme for removing Starlight. Nance was a country-bred girl, be it remembered, and having learned the locality of the Rook's Nest from Moses Cohen, she knew that she was five miles from Epsom—a distance which she could cover in an hour on foot, and in less if she could strike the railway and pick up a train.

The dying glow of the sunset in the western sky gave her the points of the compass, and with that knowledge to guide her she took a southerly direction, and by luck hit on the main road which brought her to Sutton. At the station she found that a train was due for Epsom Downs in ten minutes, and, rejoicing that her money had not been taken from her, she bought a ticket.

In her impatience it seemed ages before the engine lights swung into view, and the moment the train came to a standstill she had hold of a carriage door and leaped in. She had no sooner sank into a seat than the window of the next compartment—a first-class one—was let down, and an authoritative voice called:

"Skinner! Where the deuce are you, Skinner?"

Nance shrank further into her corner. The voice was the voice of her arch-persecutor, Mr. Leopold Tannadyce.

"Confound the beggar! he's missed it somehow, and he promised to meet us here and act as guide," continued the moneylender in his affected drawl. "We shall have to find the stables without him, Bremner. I am glad I took the precaution of coming myself, when I remembered that you had been the girl's landlord. I'll see that you don't play hanky-panky."

Nance heard no more, for the train started on again, and the window was pulled up with a bang. The few words she had heard set her heart beating fast. At any rate, she was not as yet too late. If she could give the party the slip at the station, she should reach the training stables first by a short time, for she had the advantage of knowing exactly where they were, which did not seem to be the case with the others.

After a short run the train stopped at Belmont Station, and the window of the next compartment was lowered again.

"No; he doesn't seem to be here, sir," said a voice, which Nance recognised as Frank Bremner's.

"Well, keep your head out till the train starts," responded the fainter tones of Tannadyce. "He might come up at the last moment."

Nance, with all her faculties alert, realised at once that the moneylender was still expecting the person he had called Skinner to join the party, and had delegated the lawyer's clerk to look out for him. In a second she had decided on a bold course and taken it. She put her head out of the carriage window and, reaching over, touched Bremner on the arm, at the same time imploring his si-

lence by a gesture. It was a necessary precaution for Bremner started as though he had seen an apparition.

The guard was already waving his hand to the engine-driver; there was not a moment to spare. "Delay your arrival at the stables as long as possible, but when you get there act entirely on your instructions," she whispered. "Then all will be well."

The train moved on again before Nance could gather whether Bremner in his amazement had fully understood. But she decided to act on the supposition that he had done so and would fall in with her wishes. There was now but one station (Banstead) before the terminus of the branch to Epsom Downs was reached, and her plan was to leave the railway at the former, which was but a few hundred yards further from Barron's stables, and make up for the increased distance by running. By this means she would lessen the probability of being seen by Tannadyce on quitting the train, and if Bremner helped her in the way indicated she ought to arrive at the stables with a little time in hand.

She had hardly matured her programme when the train ran into Banstead Station, and, stepping lightly on to the platform, Nance darted through the booking-office and out into the road. With a prayer on her lips that she might not have been seen from the first-class compartment, she headed straight for the stables, and ran as she had never run in her life before. Her knowledge of the classic Downs, gained in happier days, stood her in good stead, and in something under twenty minutes she was at the great gates of the stable yard.

It was pitch dark now, but a gas lamp on one of the buildings shed a feeble gleam on the range of stabling and on the trainer's house beyond. The girl's hand was on the iron bell-pull, when two men came out of the stable nearest the gate. One of them remained to lock the stable door, but the other commenced to walk towards the house.

"You've quite made up your mind, then, Sir Charles? I can't persuade you to reconsider it?" said the man with the key.

"No; I've said the last word," returned the other. "I shall put the pen through the colt's name in the morning. It would seem to me sheer heartlessness to run a horse when I am in such ter-

rible doubt and uncertainty about the lady who is my affianced wife."

"It is simply chucking away a fortune—flying slap in the face of Providence," persisted the first speaker.

"I can't help that, Barron, sorry as I am to disappoint you and the colt's other backers. I should never forgive myself if I won a triumph which my darling had died to secure for me. As I have been telling you this evening, it is my belief that she is in a grave peril, if she is still alive, at the instance of the scoundrels whose interest it was to prevent my winning this race."

With which Sir Charles Roylance, who had halted to answer the appeal, turned and continued his way to the house, leaving the trainer to follow when he had secured the stable door.

Nance's eyes filled with tears at this signal evidence of her lover's devotion. All through those three miserable days she had been wondering how her strange disappearance would affect him, but that he should forego his chance of rehabilitating his fortunes because he feared for her safety thrilled her with the proud conviction that "Charley" was true.

Changing her mind about ringing the bell, she called softly through the bars of the gate to the trainer, who came suspiciously forward. Visitors to the stable at ten o'clock at night were an unheard of anomaly in the traditions of the establishment.

"For heaven's sake let me in at once, Mr. Barron," said Nance. "I am Miss Beauchamp—you saw me on the Downs once with Sir Charles, you know. Some people will be here in a few minutes to remove Starlight from your care under legal restraint."

Tom Barron would not have been the great trainer he was if he had not possessed presence of mind. Recognising the visitor as Sir Charles' companion on the eventful morning of the trial, he admitted her without a moment's hesitation.

"So they're going to distrain on Starlight. That's artful of them," he said, as he unlocked the gates.

"Yes, I knew it last Friday, and I should have warned you then if I hadn't been prevented," panted Nance.

"We were only speaking of you a minute back, Miss," said Barron respectfully. "I'm glad you've broken loose, and—"

"Never mind me—that'll keep," Nance interrupted him, and she broke into a

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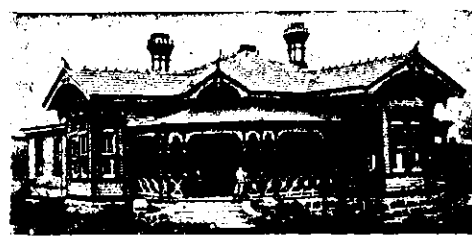
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