

concise narrative of the imminent catastrophe that was even now swooping down upon the stable. Barron listened in tense silence, but his snarled eyes twinkled as she finished.

"There was a talk of scratching the colt just now, but there won't be any need to do that if these sharks take him away from us, will there, Miss?" he said meaningly.

"I—I hope not. I have fought so hard for that horse, Mr. Barron," Nance faltered.

"I know you have," assented the trainer warmly. "Sir Charles, who is staying here to-night, has been telling me about it, but we mustn't stand here talking when we ought to be preparing to receive the representatives of the law. There is no time to explain matters to Sir Charles, so if you will kindly step this way I will find a snug hiding-place for you in the hay-loft while I ready Starlight for his journey. It wouldn't do for the plunderers to know that you had been here."

And Mr. Barron winked solemnly as he unlocked the stable again and passed in, followed by the bringer of the tidings.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

TANNADYCE'S TRIUMPH.

In the meanwhile Sir Charles Roylance was pacing up and down in the trainer's parlour wondering why his host was so long in rejoining him. He looked years older than when he saw him last, the loss of his staunch little sweetheart having wrought a change in him which no financial troubles had ever been able to effect.

Inspector Croul had proved a broken reed. That officer's confident assurance of being able to trace Nance by keeping observation on Tannadyce had yielded no results, and for the past twenty-four hours the young baronet had seen nothing of his detective ally. In his despair he had come down to Epsom to tell his trainer that he had not the heart to run Starlight on the morrow, and he had accepted the offer of a bed which Tom had made in the straw-clutching hope of inducing his favourite patron to reconsider his decision.

It was a quarter of an hour before Barron came in with vague excuses for keeping his guest waiting excuses which were cut short as soon as begun by the sonorous clanging of the yard bell. He uttered an exclamation of annoyed surprise that any one should disturb the establishment so late.

"All the lads have gone to bed; I must go myself and see who it is," he said, leaving the room hurriedly.

In restless mood Sir Charles followed him to the house door and watched him cross the yard to the big gates, through which the figures of three men were dimly visible. The trainer had no sooner reached the gate than a heated altercation ensued, which tempted Sir Charles to stroll over to the group. On his nearing them Barron turned to him in a white heat of indignation.

"Here's a bit of cheek!" he spluttered. "Three d-d process-servers come to collar your colt Starlight under a judgment, they say."

"Oh, is that Sir Charles Roylance?" crackled the sharp metallic tones of one of those outside. "Good evening, Sir Charles. You'll have more sense than this firebrand, I expect. He hardly seems to realise the consequences of obstructing us. Be good enough to ask him to allow the law to take its course."

His enemy's voice came to Starlight's harassed owner like a gust of fresh air or a bracing tonic.

"Let them in, Tom," he said, with quiet scorn. "That is, when they have shown their authority. I wouldn't take that Jew's word for anything."

Showing his teeth in an ugly grin, but repressing a retort, Tannadyce bade Bremner and the sheriff's officer produce the necessary documents. The latter were in undoubted order, and, having inspected them through the bars by the light of his lantern, Barron, with every show of reluctance, unfastened the gate. As the trio passed in he eyed them with an insolent stare of affected pity.

"By jingo! but you're a rummy lot to fetch a thoroughbred colt away," he murmured as they filed by him. "You won't know which end to begin, I'm thinking, and you'll be a pretty sick crowd by the time he's done with you."

"We'll manage," said Tannadyce shortly. "Where's the horse?"

Grumbling in unmeasured language,

the trainer led the way to the stable and unlocked it, the disarming party following close on his heels, and Sir Charles bringing up the rear with the air of a disinterested spectator.

"There! I've given you access to the horse. You can't expect me to point him out to you," said Barron with a hostile laugh.

But Tannadyce was in no way put out by his ill-humour. After one comprehensive look round the interior of the building he beckoned his companions and marched straight between the rows of loose boxes to the end one, over which the name "Starlight" was annexed in enamel letters.

"Ah! but you're well posted. I see now what that snivelling rascal who came to apply for a job here was after the other day," exclaimed Barron with bitter emphasis.

Taking no notice of him, the money-lender entered the box with his assistants, and after a wary approach to the great raking chestnut with the conspicuous white star, succeeded in getting its head into the halter which his foresight had provided. Tossing the end of the rope to Frank Bremner, who was looking heartily ashamed of himself, he bade him lead the horse out.

"There! I think we may take credit for having performed an unpleasant business with courtesy and expedition," said Tannadyce, with a sinister glance at the baronet who had preserved his unmoved demeanour.

Leaning against a corn bin, Sir Charles let his gaze follow the animal as it walked proudly to the door in the clumsy grip of the lawyer's clerk. "A very unnecessary business, if your object was to prevent Starlight winning his race to-morrow," he said quietly.

"You have lost faith in his chance? Or else the grapes are conveniently sour?" sneered Tannadyce. As men ever hate those whom they injure, so he hated the well-born victim of his rapacity, desiring that he should drink the bitter cup to the dregs. He would have preferred to leave Starlight's owner in the belief that in losing the horse he had lost a certain win.

"On the contrary, I am more confident than ever that if he had started he would have won with ease. But, as Mr Barron will hear me out, I had decided not to run him," said Sir Charles coldly.

"Oh! then you were forestalled after all by the 'machinations,' as I think you called them, of 'Parker's Lightning Finals' and the mysterious sleeping partner whom you did me the honour to identify with myself," said Tannadyce, unable in his elation to resist the thrust.

"Again on the contrary, I have backed Starlight to win a sum which would free me from your usurious clutches for ever. My reason for deciding to scratch the colt is one which would be absolutely unintelligible to your Semitic mind," was the baronet's reply, uttered with a studied contempt that goaded Tannadyce to retaliation.

"Oh, come; you'll never cram me with the notion that you meant to stand out of a big win because of that girl from 'Parker's,'" he hissed through his white teeth. "You can make your mind easy about her. I got the tip about her this afternoon. She went off with Lord Hoolligan—you know the beauty I mean—to a little place he'd taken on purpose near Mitcham Junction, and I should imagine she's not worth looking for by now."

It was only the lash of Sir Charles's scorn that could have stung him to a rejoinder so sure of retribution, for he was always careful of his skin. But it was not his victim's swiftly raised hand that was to punish the braided speech. Tom Barron, who had been nervously casting furtive glances at the hay-loft trap-door during Tannadyce's vile assertion, sprang forward, and with a mighty kick projected the slanderer three parts of the way to the stable door—out of reach of the baronet's descending fist.

"No need for you to soil yourself by touching such as him, Sir Charles," cried the angry trainer. "Shoe-leather is good enough for the likes of him." And with another apprehensive backward glance at the loft, he followed the money-lender up so threateningly that in less than ten seconds the three intruders and the horse were outside the yard gates.

Tom Barron stood and watched them through the bars till they had dwindled to a brown patch on the white chalk

streak of moonlit road; then he locked the gates and returned to the stable, from the door of which Sir Charles was just emerging.

"Thank you, Barron," he said, wearily. "That kick of yours is something on the right side of the balance-sheet, anyhow."

"Keep a good courage, sir," cried the trainer, pushing past him into the building with less than his usual ceremony. Sir Charles watched him in mild surprise as he raised his lantern to the trap-door in the ceiling, whence a ladder ran down to the floor.

Even when honest Tom called out: "Coast's clear, Miss," he did not begin to understand till a pair of dainty ankles appeared on the ladder, followed by a slight girlish figure that drew from him the glad cry of—

"Nance! My Nance!"

"Charley!" was the single word, full of a thousand meanings, with which she flung herself into her lover's outstretched arms.

When she had told in a few breathless sentences all she knew of her capture and escape the trainer interrupted with a respectful suggestion that they should adjourn to the house.

"You did brave work when you brought warning of what that rascal Jew was up to, Miss," was Mr Barron's admiring comment as he piloted the way across the yard. "But in my humble judgment you did a braver when you kept quiet in the hay-loft under all that calumny. I was in mortal fear lest you'd show up, just to give him the lie, and so blow on the deal."

"What deal?" asked Sir Charles innocently. "I rather wish you had shown yourself, darling, and crammed the lie down his throat in person. I can't see that it would have mattered, as he has got Starlight in spite of your plucky attempt to warn us."

"Tell me, Charley," said Nance, linking her arm in her lover's, "now that I

am safe, Starlight's removal is a real blow to you? I mean that now you would not have adhered to that chivalrous idea of scratching him?"

"Thank heaven, there is now no need for what you are pleased to call my chivalry," said the young man warmly. "Certainly I should have run the horse if he had remained in my hands under present circumstances."

At these simple words Tom Barron's weather-beaten face creased into a grin, and he broke into a prolonged chuckle.

"There you are, Miss," he said, as he ushered them into his cosy parlour. "That bears out what I told you—that the deal would be a sight more satisfactory with you hidden in the hay-loft."

"What deal?" asked Sir Charles once more. But all he could get just then, either from his trainer or from his sweetheart, was an interchange between the two of mysterious nods and winks, and, on Barron's part, occasional convulsions of silent laughter.

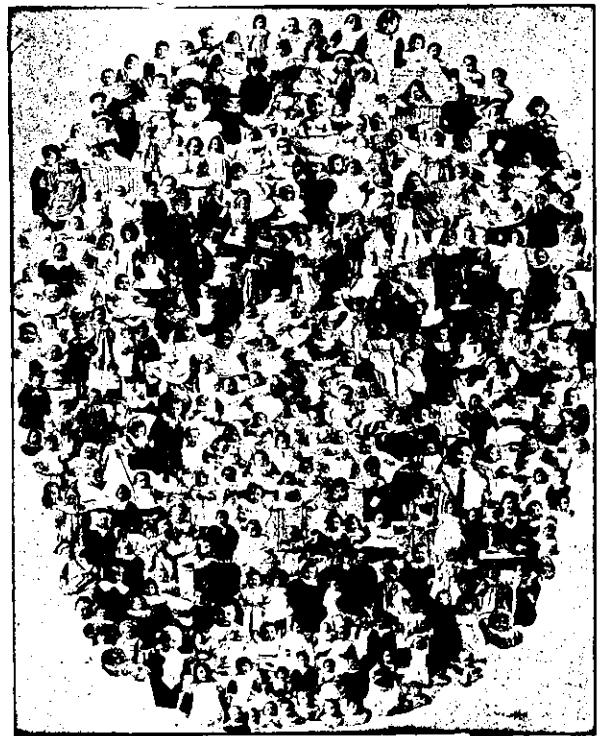
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