

THE FORTUNA FILLY.

(By HOWEL SCRATTON.)

SYNOPSIS OF PREVIOUS CHAPTERS.

The story opens in the old fashioned Bennett's Hotel in London, at which comfortable hostelry there arrives Sir Robert Ashingdon and his daughter Delia. Sir Robert is the owner of Helvellyn, one of the favourites for the Jubilee Stakes to be run at Kempton Park. The sporting baronet gives a small dinner party at which there is present Dashwood Fynes, the favoured admirer of Delia, and one Hamilton Rolfe, a gentleman who lives on his wits. During the evening John Straight, the trainer of Helvellyn, arrives and is course of conversation strongly recommends Sir Robert to purchase the Fortuna filly, after which the party breaks up.

Rolfe immediately secures a motor car, and driving at full speed to Sunbury, where the filly is, forestalls Straight in the purchase, but although disguised is recognised by the trainer. On his return to town Rolfe backs Helvellyn for the Jubilee Stakes for all the money in the market, including a wager of £3,000 to £500 with a youth named Bertie Fraser, who is intoxicated at the time, and who unsuccessfully endeavours to get out of the bet. Chapter IV. opens with the horses at Kempton Park on the morning of the race.

Helvellyn pulls up lame after a gallop, and it is decided to run the second string, Phantom City, instead. Dashwood Fynes in the meantime has backed Sir Robert's representative to win a big stake. On hearing of the mishap to the favourite Rolfe vainly tries to hedge his money.

It is then decided that as Helvellyn is amiss the second string, Phantom City, shall run for the Jubilee Stakes. The time for the race approaches and all the chief characters in the story assemble at Kempton Park to witness the contest.

This proved very exciting and is won by Flanagan's Pride, with Phantom City second and Royal Crown third. The winner, however, is guilty of a bad cross in the straight and is disqualified.

Fynes therefore throws in for a big win, subsequently making the acquaintance of the leading members of the ring, and has a lucky day all through. After a good settling day Fynes pays a visit to Cottington, the headquarters of the trainer John Straight.

CHAPTER XIII.—(Continued.)

There was a white swing-gate and a short gravel sweep up to the house, and Dash noticed that everything in the garden was in faultless order, and then they pulled up at the door, where John, who had heard the rhythmical step of the gallant grey, had come out to welcome his guest.

"How are you?" he asked. "I am glad to see you."

"Oh, I am glad to come back here!" cried Dash, as he pressed the veteran trainer's hand. "It seems such a long time since I used to come over from school to see you, but the place has not changed much, except that the garden looks, if possible, more spick and span than ever."

"Ah, I like to have things in their proper places," returned John Straight, as he trod on a stone, which had been knocked up by the cob, back into its place in the gravel.

"But come in! You must have something after your drive. Sherry and bitters or vermouth, or would you like a little whisky and soda?"

"I should like a little vermouth with a couple of drops of bitters in it, please, if I may have it," answered Dash.

"Certainly, come this way," and John led the way into his office, as he called a delightful little room, furnished with inviting armchairs, and with the walls covered with small paintings and photographs of celebrated horses which at different times had fought and won for the glory of Cottington. A big English roll-top desk stood by the window, which looked out upon the stable-yard and the row of red brick boxes; a bookcase filled with racing calendars and other volumes of turf lore occupied the walls on the left, and on the opposite side were other shelves containing histories, books of travel, a Shakespeare. Sir Walter Scott's novels, a few books of poetry, and a great number on the subject of agriculture and gardening.

There was a nest of iron boxes, such as one usually sees in a lawyer's office, in one corner, and a safe in another: a cheerful fire glowed in the grate, for though it was the middle of May, old John liked the company of a fire of an evening, and incandescent gas lamps shed their white light upon the surroundings.

The trainer touched the electric bell, and it was immediately answered by a handsome, rosy-cheeked parlourmaid, with a figure like the Venus of Milo; except that she, unlike that strapping goddess, was blessed with a pair of shapely and very serviceable arms.

"The vermouth and angostura, and some glasses, Bertha," ordered the old man, and the girl quickly brought them and set them on the table.

John poured out the vermouth and shook a drop or two of the bitters into it, and handing a glass to Dash, took another himself, saying,

"Well, here's a hearty welcome to you."

"Many thanks," said Dash. "Ah! that's good!"

"All the family are away," remarked John, "and I had thought to have you all to myself, but I got a wire this morn-

ing from Tom Gatling, saying that he was coming over to stay the night, and he will be here at dinner."

"I shall be delighted to see him again," replied Dash; "I don't suppose he will remember me, but I met him here once or twice in the old days, when he used to come over to ride trials."

"Ah, yes," said the trainer; "he used to come here very often then, but he has given up riding altogether for some time. His boys do all the riding now: young Tom is a trainer with a long string of useful horses, and Leicester and Sand-down are at the top of the tree as jockeys. I think Leicester is the finest jockey we have: he has his father's delicate hands and fine judgment of pace, combined with poor Fred Archer's daring and determination—but he never cuts a horse about, and I would rather have him ride my two-year-olds than anyone I know."

"When will Gatling get here?" asked Dash, much interested.

"I expect him at any moment: dinner is at eight, and he is sure to be in plenty of time for that, but if you would like to see your room, I will show it to you."

Dash followed Mr. Straight upstairs, and was shown into a pretty bedroom with windows looking out over wide fields of young wheat which stretched away to the foot of the downs.

His portmanteau had been unpacked, and his dress-clothes were ready laid out for him. He was glad of this, for he was not sure whether Mr Straight was in the habit of dressing for dinner or not, and this seemed to furnish the necessary information.

At that moment he heard a fly drive up to the door, and was aware that Mr. Tom Gatling had arrived.

He quickly put on his evening clothes, with a black tie and a smoking jacket, and found his way to the drawing room, where, being first down, he had leisure to inspect the furniture and ornaments.

There were choice works of art all about the room, arranged with great taste.

Sevres vases, silver cups, rare inlaid tables, beautiful water-colour paintings; they were the gifts of winning owners and other admirers, collected during a career of well over half a century. There were photographs of great men, distinguished on the turf and in the senate, costily framed, and with the autographs of their originals upon them. There were great bowls of flowers, diffusing a fragrance around, and amongst other things a grand piano and harp, which showed that when the trainer's daughters were at home, music was not lacking.

John Straight soon joined his guest, and shortly afterwards Mr. Tom Gatling made his appearance, and was introduced to Dash.

Tom did not look a day over forty, but in reality much water had flowed beneath the bridges since he had past that comfortable age. Very thin and spare, with clear blue eyes and a sharp, dominant Roman nose, fair silky hair, whose curls showed a few streaks of grey; small whiskers, and a firm mouth and strong chin. Tom Gatling still looked fit to go anywhere and to do anything. He was the embodiment of neatness and elegance. His clothes fitted him to perfection, and there was just that suspicion of dandyism which falls short of being offensive, but gives its possessor an air of distinction.

"I am pleased to meet you again, sir," said the jockey.

"I am charmed to have an opportunity of renewing our acquaintance," said Dash. "I was telling Mr. Straight that I expected you would have forgotten me, as I was only a boy when I used to see you here."

"I never forget a face," replied Tom, "and what's more, you gave us some things to remember you by. Don't you recollect the time when you went out with some of the lads and my bull-terrier, which you borrowed without leave, and went badger hunting in Grassford big wood? You came back with your hands all bitten and your face and clothes all over blood and dirt, but you had three badgers in a bag! As for poor old Tatters, he looked more like a job lot of giblets than a dog!"

"Oh, yes! but the reason of that was that Tatters got into the bag with the badgers in the cart on the way home, and we had a dreadful job to separate them."

"Well, poor old Tatters is dead and gone now; but I have some of his stock yet."

"Ah," said Dash, "he was a rare dog—the gamest I ever saw!"

The sound of a peal of softly-modulated gongs fell upon the ear.

"Come along," said John Straight, "that is the dinner."

They followed John to the dining-room, and sat down to table.

The buxom parlourmaid removed the cover from the tureen, and John ladled out copious helpings of oxtail soup.

This was followed by fried soles, a saddle of four-year-old down mutton, and numerous pies and puddings.

"What do you think of this champagne, Tom? It was a present from the Duc de Clichy when I helped him choose some horses to send over to France."

It was delicious, and Tom said so.

"I thought you would like it," said the old man. "One advantage of being a trainer is that people give you the best of everything."

After an anchovy toast the maid cleared the table and removed the cloth, and then placed wine and dessert upon the polished mahogany.

"There was a ring at the bell, and Bertha announced Mr. Player.

Sam put his head into the room and then stopped, saying,

"I beg your pardon, I did not know you had company!"

"Come in, Sam!" cried John Straight. "here's Tom Gatling and Mr. Dashwood Fynes, they will be very pleased to see you."

Thus invited, Sam entered and took a place at the table.

"I thought I would just stroll round and have a smoke with you, as I understood you were alone," said Sam.

"Glad to see you, Sam. Port or claret?"

"Claret, please; I dare not drink port," replied Sam, as he helped himself.

Dash and Tom Gatling took port, and so did the old trainer.

"This port is '68," said John; "I laid it down the year that I won the Grand Prize of Paris with the Wanderer, and you rode him, Tom."

"Ah," said Tom, looking regretfully at one of the large oil paintings which hung on the wall, wherein was depicted the great muscular horse standing on a racecourse, with Tom himself in the black and cherry, astride him, looking ridiculously tiny, and old John, then in the prime of life, standing at his head. "Ah, how the time flies! I shall never forget that day, and the night that followed it!"

"Remember that supper party?" asked John.

"That supper! I should think I did!" then, turning to Dash and Sam, who looked expectantly at him, "Mr. Straight gave a supper in honour of the Wanderer that night—it was in a private room at a restaurant in Paris, and twelve of us sat down. We were a jolly party, and all full of money. There was old George Bridger, and Teddy Hopkins, and little Vixtable (Gold Tooth, we called him, because he had more gold stopping than teeth in his mouth), and Jim Abel, and Waterworks, and 'The Honest and Manly,' and a lot of others, including poor Doctor Rochester, who used to live down here."

"Well, we were getting on splendidly, and everyone was in good temper, when a boastful Frenchman, with his hair cut like a dandy brush, and a waxed moustache, came and pulled up a chair next to me and sat down just as if he were one of the party."

"I looked at him with a sort of reproving touch, and he came close to me, and putting his hand on my shoulder, whispered something in my ear, in French."

"I could not understand what he said, but I crooked my left elbow and put it against his ribs, and then I brought down my right hand on my fist and drove the elbow bang home on to his liver—Lor! it fairly made him sigh again!"

"Then he jumped up and hollered 'Sacray tonnare!' and he made a rush at me."

"I hit him in the eye and he got under the table. Then he put his ugly head out and showed a revolver, which he pointed at me. I jumped on to the table, and Jim Abel and the doctor got hold of his legs from the other side and began to drag him out. When he came out, Mr. Straight, here, jumped on his hand and hurt it, so that he dropped the revolver, and Harry Vixtable snatched it. Then they took him to the top of the stairs and held him by the hands and feet and gave him a swing. It was a wide, straight staircase, and the noise attracted a lot of people from the public supper-room down below, so when half-a-dozen Frenchmen began to rush up the stairs, our fellows gave the chap an extra swing and let him go, so that he landed in the middle of them, and they all went to the bottom in a heap."

"There was an awful row then, and the police came, but it turned out that our visitor was a well-known pickpocket, so they thought we were rather heroes, and they let us finish our supper in peace."

"Ah," sighed John Straight, "that was thirty years or more ago! Before you were born, Mr. Fynes; most of our party are under the daisies now! I wonder whether they ever think about racing? Poor old Doctor Rochester was simply mad about it—he was as fine a sportsman as ever lived, when he was with his gun and his pointers, but on a racecourse he was a mere baby! Still, if his ghost could walk, he would go to Epsom to see Samoa run!"

"Talking of ghosts," said Sam Player, "did you hear what they did to Beale, the tipster—you know, Whispers—at the Craven Meeting? They were talking about ghosts in the billiard-room at the Hartland, and someone said, pointing to Beale, 'That chap has to cross the churchyard on the way to his lodgings.' 'All right,' says Vic Withers, the rival tout, 'I'll give him a fright to-night! Well, Whispers is not very easily frightened, so some of them betted Withers a fiver he could not frighten Beale. Vic went away to get ready, and left some of his pals to talk about ghosts to Beale till closing time, which they did."

"In the meantime, Vic Withers went home and got his nightshirt, and went into the cemetery to wait for Whispers."

"Whispers says good-night, and starts off home alone, but he had a big stick. All the other chaps followed on tip-toe to see the fun."

"It was a very dark night, and Whispers walked boldly into the graveyard, and when he got to the middle, there on a tombstone, stood a great tall figure in white—you know what a lanky chap Vic is—waving his arms about. Whispers took no notice, so Vic went down on his hands and knees in the path and began scratching up the gravel with his fingers, and making a horrid screeching noise like an owl. Whispers walked up to him and brought his big stick down on his rump, a regular pluggler, saying, 'Get inside, you beggar, you've got no business out here!'"

"Vic jumped up and ran for his life, and Whispers just turned round to the fellows, who were roaring with laughter, and said, 'Well, gentlemen, I think you've won your fiver; good-night! How he got to know that it was a put-up thing, and that they were betting on it, they never found out, but not much escapes Mr. Whispers' ears, or eyes either!'"

"Bravo!" cried Tom, "not so bad for a 'country horse,' they don't have it all their own way at Newmarket, after all!"

When the laughter had subsided, John got up and went to a cupboard, from which he produced a box of large cigars, which he placed on the table, inviting his guests to help themselves.

Tom Gatling and Dash lighted up accordingly, and proceeded to puff away, but neither Sam Player nor Mr. Straight smoked.

"That Mr. Beale, or 'Whispers,' as they call him, seems to be getting quite a string of horses at Dick Jodrell's," remarked Tom, as the smoke from his Rothschild curled upwards, spreading a delicious aroma. "I see that he sent another there the other day; a three-year-old filly by Peasant out of Fortuna, never heard of her before."

Dash started as he heard the name, but old John never moved a muscle.

"Tip-mongering must be a profitable trade," said Sam.

"Yes," replied John drily; "but happen to know something about this filly, which I think may disqualify her if she runs. She don't belong to Beale at all, but to Hamilton Rolfe, the pigeon sharp."

"How did you find that out?" asked Tom; "it is worth knowing! But fancy a man in Mr. Rolfe's position, passing as he does for a gentleman, getting mixed up in such things."

"How I know is that I saw the filly sold," said John. "I went to buy her for Sir Robert Ashingdon on the night before the Jubilee, and this Mr. Rolfe was beforehand with me." And then he told the story of the dinner, and how Rolfe had forestalled him, amidst expressions of disgust from his hearers.

"Well," remarked Sam Player, "we must think of a plan to get even with him. They don't keep their horses doing nothing very long in Jodrell's stable, so I should think that as soon as they have got this filly broken they will have her out for an airing. If they happen to put her in a selling race, thinking nobody will claim her, you may get your chance."

"If I happen to be there, and to have a horse running in the same race, I should certainly exercise my right of claiming," said John; "but how am I to know where they will enter her?"

"I know!" cried Sam; "I have a brother living at Epsom, and he knows all about Dick Jodrell's horses. I will get him to let me know when and where they are going to enter this filly, and if it is a selling race, you might put in something of your own to give you a claim if she gets beaten—of course, if she wins you can object on the ground of ownership."

"As you know, Sam, it is not in my line to follow a man up because I know something which will injure him, but in this instance, this Rolfe behaved in such a blackguardly way that I will show him no mercy. But if I get the opportunity of claiming this filly, will you let me buy her for you, Mr. Fynes?"