

CHAPTER XXI.

A SELLING RACE.

As she drove home beside her father, Delia was excogitating a plan which should enable her to go to Alexandra Park on the following Saturday, and when she had settled upon a workable scheme, she said slyly,

"Dad, I think I shall run up to London one day this week and see Mrs. Vasher Baines. I want to do some shopping, and she asked me to come and spend a day with her."

"Very well, my dear," said Sir Robert; "you can go any day you like."

"I will write to Mrs. Baines and fix a day with her, then," replied Delia.

And so the next morning she wrote to Mrs. Baines and told her that she wanted to go to Alexandra Park races, and asked whether Mrs. Baines would go with her. "Of course," she added, in a postscript, "I could not go alone, but with you chaperoning me it would be all right."

In a couple of days an answer came saying that Mrs. Baines would be charmed to take Delia, and promising to meet her train at Vauxhall, when they could do some shopping in Oxford-street and then drive down in the carriage to the races. The rest of the week Delia was on the thorus of expectation, until Saturday, when she took an early train from Belstone, and was met by Mrs. Baines as arranged.

Delia had decided to confide her love affair with Dash to her friend, as she had to give some excuse for her anxiety to go to the races; and she thought that she could safely trust Mrs. Baines to keep her counsel.

And so, when the train reached Vauxhall, and the ladies, having duly kissed, had taken their seats in the open landau, Delia, with much show of confusion, told how she was secretly engaged to Dash, and how she could not tell her father, because Dash had not enough money to marry her yet, and she was afraid Sir Robert would not sanction the engagement; and how Dash was becoming quite celebrated at the Bar, and many other things about him; finishing up by saying that he was to be at the races, and that was why she wished to go there.

"You dear, sweet, naughty girl!" exclaimed Mrs. Baines, when she had heard the story. "I always thought there was something between you two! But you may rely upon me to help you in every way. You must come to London and stay a fortnight with me, and we will have Mr. Fynes to dinner every day, if he likes to come."

"Oh, thank you, kind Mrs. Baines, that will be ever so delightful!"

And so it was arranged that Delia was to be invited to stay in London very soon.

After visiting several of the large shops in Oxford-street, which are so beloved of the fair, they started for Alexandra Park, and their carriage having been pulled up in a spot on the rails close to the winning post, the ladies crossed over to the club enclosure.

Here, as good luck had ordained it, they met Dashwood Fynes at the gate; and after he had expressed his delight and surprise at seeing them, he proposed luncheon, which they accepted gladly, and all went into the Club luncheon-room to lay a good foundation for the day's work.

When they had finished, Dash made an excuse for leaving the ladies, as he wanted to see John Straight, so he found them a comfortable seat in the sunshine, and promised to return in a few minutes.

They had not sat there long, looking at the people hurrying about the course, and laughing at the efforts which a round youth, squeezed into a jockey cap and a racing jacket, was making to sell his tips, when they were joined by Hamilton Rolfe.

"How are you, Mrs. Baines? Good morning, Miss Ashingdon; it must be something very important which brings you here?"

"Oh, no," replied Mrs. Baines, coldly, for she did not like Rolfe. "It was such a lovely day, that Miss Ashingdon and I decided to drive down here, just on the spur of the moment."

"Indeed?" said Rolfe, showing his white teeth in a smile of incredulity. "But I see that there are two horses from the Cottington stable entered in the same race—surely that may have something to do with your being here, Miss Ashingdon?"

"Not the least bit in the world," answered Delia; "except that I shall be glad to see the last of them. I suppose you noticed that they were both to be sold after the race?"

"Yes, I saw that; but I expect you hope to win the race with one of them first?"

"The others will have to be pretty bad for one of ours to win!" replied Delia. "Old Agulhas is as slow as a man in boots, and that is why my father gave him away; and Balham was only sent here because we want to get rid of him," and she looked at Rolfe with such a

simple, open expression in her clear eyes that no suspicion that she was misleading him entered his head.

"I am afraid they will not fetch much of a price, then," he answered; "there is not much demand for used-up platers."

"It is better to get rid of useless horses at any price than to keep them," said Delia; "but perhaps you can tell me what will win that race? The others seem pretty bad, too—Lamplighter, Quicksilver, Conningtower, Carlyle, Domesday—I don't think any of those are very good; but what about the filly by Peasant out of Fortuna? Has she ever done anything?" she inquired in the most innocent way.

"Oh, yes," chimed in Mrs. Baines; "what about her? I like the name, and I shall advise Mr. Fynes to back that one."

"You had better not!" exclaimed Rolfe; "she is rotten bad. She ran at Newcastle the other day, and finished nowhere."

"Oh, well then, she's no good; but I expect she is as good as ours," said Delia.

"You will have to look farther than either for the winner, I expect," said Rolfe. "I fancy Lamplighter myself."

At that moment Dash came back, and Rolfe moved away and went in search of Whispers and Jodrell to impart to those worthies the pleasant information that they had no danger to fear from the Cottington horses, and to send off a wire to a trusty confederate in London with the key-word which was to authorise him to work a starting-price commission all over the country in favour of the Fortuna filly.

When Dash sat down beside the ladies the numbers were up for the first race, but he had no intention of betting; so he listened with amusement to the story of how Rolfe had been trying to pump Delia about what she knew of the horses, and how he had failed to get the correct information.

"Still," said Dash, "I am sorry you had to tell him what was not true."

"I did not tell him what was not true!" exclaimed Delia; "I prevaricated. I was not going to tell him I thought one of ours would win; and besides, if either does win, I don't know which it will be."

"Well, I think Delia was quite right," put in Mrs. Baines. "But I think you two had better go and take a walk in the paddock together. I am rather tired, and shall sit here and see the first race."

The suggestion commended itself to both Delia and Dash, so they found their way to the paddock, and soon came upon John Straight with his horses, and Sam Player with him.

He had adopted the suggestion of Sam Player, and old Balham was walking round with enormous bandages on his forelegs, out of which masses of cotton-wool protruded. He was followed by Agulhas, who, never a taking horse in his slow paces, was walking listlessly behind as if he had made up his mind that he would do nothing to induce anyone to fancy him.

"So you don't mean to object on the ground of ownership?" asked Sam.

"No; I hate objecting unless I am obliged to do so. But we will have a good try to beat them."

"Good morning, Mr. Straight," cried Delia; "you see I have got here, after all!"

"So I see," said the trainer; "but you are in good hands, I notice," smiling at Dash.

"Do you think we shall beat the Fortuna filly?" asked Delia.

"No," replied John, "I don't."

"You don't? after all the trouble which you have taken. What has made you change your mind?"

"Look there!" said John, "that is the filly over in that far corner."

"Well, what about it?" asked Delia again.

"Why," replied John, "when I came out I expected to see a half-trained filly, and I never had any idea that she could have got her so straight in the time they have had her. That mare is almost fit, and she is good-looking enough to win anything."

They went nearer to the mare, and sure enough Jodrell had worked wonders with her. She had grown and thickened marvellously. She was a filly of enormous power, standing over sixteen hands, and very lengthy; and, as John had said, she showed that she had done a lot of work and had thriven on it.

"Fancy putting a mare like that in a selling race!" exclaimed John; "they must be very hard up to risk her; but I suppose they will back her for a pot of money, so they will be able to buy her in, whatever she fetches."

"But we must buy her if she wins," said Delia; "we won a lot of money at Ascot over Mary Seaton, and if she is worth their while to buy in, it is worth our while to out-bid them for her."

"Bravo!" said John. "Then will you let me use my discretion about buying her if she wins, Mr. Fynes?"

"Yes, by all means; I am quite in love with her," replied Dash.

"Somebody will be jealous if you talk like that, young man," laughed the trainer.

"Oh, no; I am quite as much in love with her as Dash is; we must have her!" cried Delia.

"Very well, then, we will," said John, decidedly. "But I must go to the weighing-room and weigh out my jockeys; Sam Player rides Agulhas, and young Stowers is up on Balham, he gets the five pounds' apprentices' allowance." And so saying, the old gentleman turned his steps to the weighing-room, and saw the riders safely through the scales.

The numbers were up for the third race, and the betting in the ring was in full swing. Lamplighter was favourite at five to two; and at first a few bets were taken about the Fortuna filly at four to one, by people who had seen her in the paddock and had been impressed by her good looks, but there was no stable money in the ring for her, and as all her connections had been industriously decrying her chance throughout the day, she soon drifted out to ten to one; whilst there was a little public money for Balham at five, on account of his popular ownership, and Agulhas had some backers at a point longer odds.

The ladies had gone over to their carriage to see the race, and Dash was with them there, and as the horses were started just in front of them, they had an excellent view of all that took place.

The seven other horses stood quietly enough, but it was quickly evident that the Fortuna filly did not like the starting gate, and she showed a decided disinclination to go up to it.

Jodrell, seeing this, went behind her with a big whip, and a lad got hold of her head and led her forward.

When she had joined her field the machine flew up suddenly, and the race was started.

Jodrell cracked his whip behind the mare, but she ran sideways, and nearly went over the rails among the carriages, and was only with great difficulty prevented by her jockey from doing this. As it was, she lost at least ten lengths before she could be got straight, and when she set off in pursuit of her field, they had reached the point where the course divides.

The horses went along the low ground, and as they rounded the first bend old Balham, with Stowers riding to orders, was making strong running, with a lead of three lengths from Lamplighter, who was lying second. Then came Agulhas, going well, followed by Carlyle, Domesday, and the rest, with Fortuna still last, but having made up a great amount of leeway.

They passed out of sight of the carriages, and when they reappeared, Balham was still retaining his lead, with Agulhas on even terms with Lamplighter, and the Fortuna filly just behind the pair, and trying to pass on the rails.

This she failed to accomplish, as Lamplighter stuck close to the palings, so she drew back to come up on the other side, but it was too late; Agulhas had passed Lamplighter, and was second, whilst the latter, when they were opposite the stands, rolled across the course in front of Fortuna and further interfered with her, and although she eventually managed to get a clear opening, it was not until Balham had galloped past the post a winner, with Agulhas beating the filly a head for second place.

Delia was wild with excitement, and shouted "Balham wins!" at the top of her voice; and Mrs. Baines, thinking that all this enthusiasm was on account of her father's colours being successful, joined Delia in her vociferations.

Dash jumped down and hurried to the weighing-room, in time to see the horses come in, and Stowers, pale with emotion (for it was his first winning mount), take his place in the balance and be passed "all right" by the clerk of the scales.

Hamilton Rolfe looked pea-green as he gazed at the strapping Fortuna filly whilst her jockey unsaddled her and hurried to weigh in.

"I never saw such damned ruddy luck in my life!" he muttered. "If it had not been for that cursed starting machine she would have won in a canter!"

"Better luck next time," remarked Dick Jodrell.

"Next time! How do you think I am going to hang on till next time? I tell you I had a hell of a lot of money on her, and a damned sight more than I shall be able to pay!"

"Oh, you'll pull through somehow," said the trainer, consolingly; "and she will get all your money back for you another day, and a good lot more besides. But I am going to send her home as quick as I can."

Just then the clerk of the scales came to them, followed by Mr. Straight, carrying a paper in his hand.

"Mr. Jodrell, he said the official, 'your horse has been claimed.'

"Claimed?" exclaimed Jodrell and Rolfe in one breath. "Who the deuce has claimed her?"

"I have, with Agulhas," quietly interposed Mr. Straight; "and here's the delivery order."

"That be damned!" ejaculated Rolfe. "You are not going to claim our filly!"

"I am sure Mr. Straight will withdraw his claim when he knows that we are particularly anxious to keep the filly," said Jodrell, politely.

"Indeed, I shall do nothing of the kind!" said John, stoutly. "Here is the order, and I will take the filly—here, Bamford, take charge of this mare. Buckle, you go with him, and put her in a box till you hear from me."

Bamford, a particularly strong and well-developed young fellow, who acted as travelling lad, took the bridle, and Teddy Buckle ranged up alongside of him.

"It's no use your arguing," said the clerk of the scales to Jodrell; "the mare is sold, and there is an end of it. As for you," he added, turning to Rolfe, "you have got nothing to do with it, and you had better clear out!"

Rolfe, seeing that he was helpless to save the filly, pocketed his anger as well as he could, and looked on in a dazed sort of way as Bamford led the filly away.

"She looks very much better than she did that night at Feltham Hill, when you went to see her on your motor car," remarked John Straight to Rolfe, in a perfectly pleasant and courteous manner, as if nothing at all out of the common had occurred; "but how is Mr. Phillips, of Croydon? I wonder he did not come to see his mare run."

"Oh, you knew me, did you?" cried Rolfe, in a voice of passion; "and you came here on purpose to do this, I suppose?"

"Yes," said John; "I came here to beat you and to buy your filly if I could, and I am glad to say that I have succeeded."

"Well, all I can say is, it is a low, vile, mean, blackguardly trick!" shrieked Rolfe, beside himself with fury.

"I don't think you had better talk about blackguardliness," replied John; "but I have wasted too much time with you already," and he turned and went back to the sale-ring, where Balham was just being knocked down for three hundred and fifty guineas.

Then Agulhas was put up, and he fetched two hundred; so that, what with the one hundred and fifty which was half of the surplus over the selling price of £50, due to Agulhas out of the price of Balham, the trainer had done pretty well.

At the ringside Mr. Straight met Delia and Dash, for he had particularly requested the latter not to accompany him when he claimed the filly, so that Rolfe should have no suspicion that she was to become Dash's property; and he then told them that he had secured the Fortuna filly, and that Rolfe was fit to bite nails over it; "but now," he continued, "I will introduce you to Joe Tritton, for I think you had better send the filly to his place at Poledown to be trained. If you will go into the club refreshment room, I will bring him to you there, so that Rolfe shall not see us together."

Dash and Delia did as they were desired, and they were shortly joined by John Straight and his brother trainer, Joe Tritton, whom he formally introduced. Joe was a stout, good-looking man of middle age, with a clear complexion and black side whiskers, and his head was bald and venerable.

"Mr. Fynes is going to have the filly that I have just claimed, and I thought he might send her to you, Joe, if you could take her?"

"I shall be delighted to take her, Mr. Fynes," replied Joe; "she is a great fine filly, and looks like taking a good handicap later on."

"Yes, Joe," said John; "you must have a shot at the Cambridgeshire."

"More unlikely things have happened," replied Joe; "but it is a curious thing that I used to train the dam of this filly when I was living at Chantilly as private trainer to Baron de la Pelouse. Old Fortuna won a lot of races for us, and I don't see why the daughter should not do as well."

"That is settled, then," said Dash; "I will leave entries and so on entirely to you, for I have no experience."

"And I suppose you will register an assumed name," put in John Straight, "so as not to have the judges asking for tips in Court?"

"Oh, yes; I had not thought of the assumed name. Let's see, what shall I call myself?"

"Call yourself 'Mr. Chambers,'" suggested Delia.

"Very well," assented Dash; "I will be 'Mr. Chambers.' But now we will have a glass of wine, to drink success to the Fortuna filly!"

(To be continued.)