

THE FORTUNA FILLY.

(By HOWEL SCRATTON.)

CHAPTER XXIII.—(Continued.)

"Sit down here by me," she said at last, and seated herself on a luxuriously-padded sofa, a little too big for two and a little too small for three.

Twitterton took his place beside her. "I have been thinking a great deal about you lately," he said.

"Really? I hope you thought nice things about me, then," said Mrs. Baines.

"I have come here to tell you my thoughts! I have seen a good deal of you now, and I find that I cannot go on like this. I may as well say it—I love you! I cannot look at you without a thrill! I cannot hear your voice without a tremor. Scents that remind me of you intoxicate me, sounds that recall your voice set me dreaming! What am I to do? I love you! I love you!"

Mrs. Baines looked at him with the soft, sensuous, wonderfully alluring expression that her violet eyes sometimes conveyed, and smiled.

"What am I to do?" he cried again. "I love you! and I know that you are a beautiful woman, probably surrounded by men who say that to you every day; and I suppose it does not seem much to you—only what you have a right to expect! But it is death to me," and tears stood in poor Twitterton's eyes.

Mrs. Baines was not cruel, and she knew her own mind exactly. She would not keep this man on tenter-hooks. She opened her arms and said "Come!" and Twitterton somehow found himself folding the lady to his breast and covering her beautiful cheeks with kisses.

"Oh, my darling!" he exclaimed "Thank God! this is more than I deserve!"

While Mrs. Vasher Baines was engaged with Mr. Twitterton in the boudoir, Hamilton Rolfe called, and was shown into the drawing-room, where Delia was sitting alone. After a few common-place remarks, he drew his chair nearer to her, and said,

"I have never seen a girl who interested me as much as you do, Miss Ashingdon!"

"I am sure I don't know why I should interest you particularly," replied Delia; "you never interested me very much!"

"Don't be unkind! I suppose it is because you know that you are rich, and that I am not, that you won't look at me?"

"Riches never entered into the matter at all," said Delia, wishing that Mrs. Baines would come to her rescue.

"Well, then," pursued Rolfe, "you are not too young to understand what love is. I love you, and I mean to marry you!"

"Mr. Rolfe!" exclaimed Delia. "I have never given you the least right to insult me like this!"

"I don't mean to insult you, but I am determined that you shall be my wife! I have sworn it!" cried Rolfe.

"I am going!" said Delia, rising.

Rolfe sprang from his chair and seized Delia round the waist, attempting to kiss her.

"Let me go, you brute," said Delia, struggling violently, but afraid to cry out on account of the scene which would ensue.

"I love you! promise to be my wife and I will let you go!" whispered Rolfe. "I would rather die!" screamed Delia. "Let me go!"

"I swear I will not let you go till you have kissed me and promised to marry me," said Rolfe, beside himself.

Delia had been edging round towards the bell, and when it was within reach, she seized the handle and pulled it with all her might.

Rolfe did not see what she had done, so he redoubled his attempts to kiss her.

When she heard the sound of steps on the stairs, Delia suddenly left off struggling and sat down on the settee.

"Kiss me, if you want to!" she said, auntingly. "I shall like the footman to see you doing it, for I hear him coming, and he will throw you out of the house if you don't go quietly."

And she held her face towards him aggravatingly, well knowing that he dared not kiss her.

The footman opened the door and looked inquiringly for orders.

"The door for Mr. Rolfe!" said Delia, and turning to Rolfe, "Good afternoon, Mr. Rolfe; I am afraid we shall not see you again for a long time."

"Good-bye, Miss Ashingdon," said Rolfe, and he tried to walk out of the room in the presence of the servant as if nothing out of the ordinary course had occurred.

Delia rushed to her bedroom and burst into a torrent of tears.

She longed to see Dash, and to tell him all about it; but she knew that if Dash heard of Rolfe's conduct there would be a scene and a scandal, and she made up her mind to keep the matter from him, for she dreaded her name mixed up as being the cause of Dash giving Rolfe a horse-whipping.

And so she waited till Mrs. Baines came up to her, with the news that she had accepted Mr. Twitterton's proposal of marriage; and then, after congratulating her friend, she fell on her neck, sobbing, and told her all about Hamilton Rolfe's conduct.

"Don't trouble yourself about that, my dearest Delia; we will tell the servants that we shall be 'not at home,' if he calls again. You were quite right to decide not to say anything to Dash about it, for I believe he would kill him. Pull yourself together, and cheer up! Mr. Twitterton has gone home to dress, and he is coming here to dinner, and, with him, Dash."

"Are you quite certain that I ought to say nothing to Dash about it?" asked Delia.

"Quite certain! It would upset everything if you did. If Dash smashed him up and it came out in the papers, everyone would know that you were bound to Dash, and then your father would have a word to say."

"Very well, dear Mrs. Baines, I will keep the horrible thing quiet until I am married to Dash, but then I will tell him; and I hope I shall be there when he horsewhips that cad Rolfe! But now I want water; lots of cold water with toilet vinegar in it to cool my eyes and wash my hands from the touch of that loathsome man! I feel contaminated by his touch. Look at my wrists where he held them?" and she showed the marks of Rolfe's fingers.

"Never mind, dear," said Mrs. Baines; "it will be all right after you have put your hands in the cold water."

CHAPTER XXIV.

RANELAGH.

"I don't see why you should call me 'Mrs. Baines,'" said that lady one day, when she was driving Delia down to Ranelagh, "I would like you to call me Laura."

"Very well, dear; I will call you Laura for the future," said Delia.

"That will be much nicer."

"Do you know, Laura," Delia went on, "I have never been to the Ranelagh Club—I am so looking forward to it!"

"I think you will enjoy yourself to-day; there will be tent-pegging and polo, and then some balloons will go up, and we shall see everyone we know there; and altogether it will be very jolly."

"Dash said he would be there at about five," remarked Delia.

"Yes, I know. John Twitterton is coming with him. Isn't it fun our being engaged to two friends—we can make them run after us in couples, like dear little dogs," and Mrs. Baines laughed.

"I am so glad you accepted Mr. Twitterton, Laura dear; I saw he was in love with you some time ago, and I wondered when he would propose."

"Poor, dear man; I don't believe he ever would have proposed if I had not helped him, but he is a duck, and I could not bear to see him looking so miserable."

"Of course," said Delia, "you will be able to marry when you like, but poor Dash and I will be obliged to wait until we get enough money to set up house-keeping on."

"I will tell you a secret, Delia, dear. Of course it is not to be talked about yet, but John says he is going to apply for silk very soon, for he thinks it would be nice to be a King's counsel before we are married; so that that ought to help Dash on a bit."

"How will it help Dash?" asked Delia. "Of course it will be very nice for Mr. Twitterton to take silk, but I don't see how it will benefit Dash."

"Well, then, that is just what I am going to tell you. You know that John has a very large practice as a junior."

"Yes, I know; one of the largest, Dash says it is."

"Very well; when John takes silk it is most likely that Dash will get nearly all his junior briefs; John says that he can induce most of his solicitors who brief him to engage Dash as his junior."

"How delightful!" cried Delia, "then Dash really will get on! Oh, it is kind of Mr. Twitterton!"

"John says it will be much more convenient to him to have Dash in his cases than a stranger, because Dash was his pupil and always has had a room in his chambers, so that John knows the way he does his work."

"I am delighted! I cannot tell you how glad I am, Laura, and how kind I think it of Mr. Twitterton! But you have told me a secret, and I will tell you one in return."

"Oh, yes; tell me a secret, dear. I love secrets."

"You remember the day when we went to Alexandra Park races?"

"Of course I do; when Baiham won."

"Yes; well you remember there was a horse called the Fortuna filly that ran in the same race?"

"I remember; she got a very bad start and finished third."

"Well, after the race, Mr. Straight bought the Fortuna filly for Dash, and she is now being trained for him at a place called Poledown, near Gatherstone."

"What for?" exclaimed Mrs. Baines. "When is she going to run? We must go and see her win."

"Oh, she won't run till the end of October. She is going to run in the Cambridgeshire, and her trainer thinks she is a very good filly, so perhaps we may win a lot of money."

"How exciting! We must manage to go to Newmarket and see the race," said Mrs. Baines.

The carriage stopped at the gates of the Ranelagh Club, and the gate-keeper, in a straw hat with a red ribbon, came forward and took the ladies' passes. "Right, coachman!" he said, and they drove through the shrubbery and round to the door of the fine old Club-house.

The hall and reception-rooms were filled with a throng of men in frock coats and patent boots, and ladies in all the most marvellous confections of Worth and Paquin, and Mrs. Baines guided Delia through the gay crowd and out on to the terrace at the back.

The scene was delightful; a band was playing under the trees, and all the world of fashion seemed to have congregated on the great mossy lawn. There were boats on the lake paddling up and down in the shade of immense cedars, much to the annoyance of a troop of black and white bernicle geese, who had been driven from the water by the rowers, and were holding an indignation meeting on an island, where they expressed their disapprobation by shrill hisses.

"Let us go and get good places for the gymkhana," said Mrs. Baines, and they wandered away to the old polo ground, where already a great many people had assembled.

A number of drags were there, and as they crossed the road Lord Thistleton drove up with his team of bays, with their sleek coats shining like satin in the sunshine.

Beautiful polo ponies were being led about by their grooms, and men in white breeches and brown boots were waiting to take part in the sports.

The ladies found some vacant chairs, and sat down to look on.

First there was tent-pegging, in which several Indian native princes took part, their brown complexions and great black eyes looking the darker in contrast with the brilliant colours of their magnificent turbans.

The pegs were placed in rows of four, along a strip of turf which looked like a miniature racecourse, and the competitors rode four abreast, galloping the length of the course and picking up the pegs on their lances as they passed.

After the tent-pegging came a game which was called pig-sticking; the pig being represented by a sack of wadding attached to a rope which a man on horseback held in his hand, trailing the pig behind him, and followed by the hunters, armed with spears and riding the cleverest polo ponies imaginable.

The man who trailed the pig galloped about the course whilst the others pursued him and tried to stick the porker, but whenever a spear came dangerously close to the poor animal, a sudden jerk of the rope caused it to bound away, and its would-be assassin only speared the ground.

At last, after a most exciting chase, one of the Indians managed to drive his spear right through the pig and pin it to the earth. The man with the rope let go, and the hunters gathered round to witness the death struggles of the wadded sack.

There were other sports, and then a game of polo, which interested Delia immensely; and Mr. Twitterton and Dash made their appearance just in time to see the three huge balloons go up and sail majestically away, with the aeronauts in the cars waving their hats in token of farewell.

Then they had tea on the lawn, and listened to the band till dinner time, when they repaired to the large dining-room in the garden, and had a capital dinner; after which they sat on the terrace in basket chairs, and heard the vocalists who sang under the light of the Chinese lanterns, whilst coffee and liqueurs were brought, and Twitterton and Dash slowly smoked their cigars.

"Does John know about your race-horse?" whispered Mrs. Baines to Delia.

"Yes; Dash told him," said Delia.

"Very well. I shall talk about it, then. I do want to hear more about the filly."

So she turned to Dash and said, "Delia has let me into the secret about the Fortuna filly. What are you going to call her? I suppose you will give her a name?"

"Oh, yes," replied Dash; "let us all think of a name. What do you propose, Mrs. Baines?"

"What is the father's name?" asked the lady.

"Peasant," replied Dash.

"Well, I should call her 'Mis Fortune,'" said Mrs. Baines.

"Oh, no!" cried Delia; "that is a horrid name. What do you suggest, Mr. Twitterton?"

"How would 'Out of Luck' do?" asked Mr. Twitterton.

"It is just as bad as the other; we want to be in luck, not out of luck. Dash, you have a try."

"What do you think of 'Treasure Trove'?" That is the sort of thing a Peasant finds when he has fortune.

"I like that much better than the others," said Delia.

"Well, let us hear what you propose yourself, Delia," said Mrs. Baines.

"I know a good name for her, but I shall not give it to her till she has won the Cambridgeshire: she will remain the Fortuna filly till then, and she shall change her name when I do," and Delia looked roguishly at Dash.

"Then there will be a good deal of changing of names amongst the ladies about that time. I don't think Baines is such a pretty name as Twitterton," said the bearer of the last-mentioned patronymic.

"Be quiet, John!" said Mrs. Baines. "I shall go away with Delia and leave you men to enjoy each other's society if you talk such nonsense."

"Beg pardon," said Mr. Twitterton; "but really Twitterton is an awfully pretty name. It sounds like love-birds twittering!"

"Donkeys!" cried Mrs. Baines, striking at her lover with a fan.

"I heard from Tritton about the filly to-day," remarked Dash; "he says that she is very well, and he likes her immensely; but he wants me to buy something to lead her in her work, so I have written to him to authorise him to spend three hundred pounds on a horse for that purpose."

"Three hundred seems a lot of money to give," said Mrs. Baines.

"Well, Tritton says that he must have something that can go a bit, as the horses he has got cannot get out of her way; and he thinks if he has any luck he will be able to buy a horse than can pick up a little race as well and so pay back his purchase money."

"Let us go for a quiet stroll round by the lake," said Mrs. Baines; "the water looks so pretty with the reflections of the lanterns on it."

"Oh, do let us!" chimed in Delia. "It will be lovely."

And so they paired off and walked by the side of the great cool brown sheet of water, and over the rustic bridge on the other side, and from the lighted distance, glittering with many coloured lanterns, came a woman's voice, singing a passionate love-song.

"This is fairy-land!" whispered Delia. Dash did not answer, but he held Delia's hand in his and they walked side by side, spell-bound by the magic of the place.

The song was drawing to a close, and the rich contralto throbbled across the water in a low, pleading cry, and died out into nothingness.

They went on in silence for some moments, and then Dash said, "Dearest, that song makes me sad. It makes me feel what sordid, worldly creatures we are, struggling for fame and money! I should like to give up everything—my profession and that hateful betting—and live on what we have got, in a tiny cottage by the Cornish sea!"

"You have put your hand to the plough!" said Delia.

"Oh, yes; I know, and I shall not turn back; but still, it seems to be waste of life to spend all the time that we might be passing in God's sunshine, cooped up in dusty chambers waiting for briefs which come so slowly!"

"You ought not to complain, Dash; you have had a good many briefs lately."

"I don't complain, darling; I think I have been very lucky lately, thanks to the advertisement that libel case gave me; but still, I wish we could be married."

"Has Mr. Twitterton told you that he is going to take silk?" asked Delia.

"No! When did you hear that?"

"Mrs. Baines told me to-day; and she said that it would make a great difference to your prospects, Dash, dear."

"By Jingo!" exclaimed Dash. "I should think it would! The only thing is, I wish I had had a few years more practice first. I don't know whether solicitors will send me big cases at my age."

"Mrs. Baines said they would, and that Mr. Twitterton would tell them they were to," Delia replied.