

# Thoroughbreds.

By W. A. FRASER

Author of "The Outcast," "Mooswa," and Other Stories.

While Langdon labored over the problem of Mayne's identity, he had watched the horses at the post through his glasses. The Dutchman had behaved well, his trifle of eagerness to break away was even better than Lauzanne's indolent indifference. The other five had acted as three-year-olds and went to act with erratic indecision; one minute violent desire, and the next obstinate reluctance characterizing their inter-actable twistings, backings and plungings. It had not been for long; a neck or half a length at the start meant little when a mile and a half stretched its tiring length between them and the finish post.

Langdon's perplexity was cut short by the cry "They're off!" the jingle of a bell, and the scurrying of many feet, as eager men rushed for higher points of observation in the stand.

As the seven horses came thundering by, pulling double in eager ignorance of the long journey that lay before them, Langdon saw with evil satisfaction that The Indian was well out in the lead.

The Dutchman was sixth, and behind with a short, awkward strength in his gallop, loafed Lauzanne.

There was smoothness in the stride of Hanover's big son, the Dutchman, and Langdon, as he watched him swing with strong grace around the first turn, mentally figured the \$10,000 that would shortly be his.

"That skate win!" he sneered, as Lauzanne followed. "He gallops like a fat pig. He can't live the pace—he can't live the pace," he repeated, and his voice was mellow with a cheerful exultation.

His observations seemed eminently truthful. Allis' horse trailed farther and farther behind the others.

Out in front galloped with unseemingly haste The Indian—a brown blotch of swift-gliding color. Two lengths from his glistening hoofs raced four horses in a bunch—two bays, a gray and a black, so close together that they formed a solid mosaic of mottled hue against the green background of the field beyond.

Then the Dutchman, with his powerful stride, full of easy motion—a tireless gallop that would surely land him the winner, Langdon thought, as he hung with breathless interest on every move of Westley's boy.

Mike Gaynor had taken his place on the little platform at the top of the steps leading to the stand. He was watching the race with intense interest. His judgment told him that this fast pace could not last and that Lauzanne could gallop as he was going from end to end of the mile and a half, even faster if he so wished. At the mile and a quarter a half thrill of hope came to Mike for Lauzanne as he saw the ruck and surely galloping on the leaders. And still his rider was lying low on the withers, just a blue blur on the dark gold of the chestnut.

"Bot' 'umbe, but they're a pair!" muttered the Irishman. "Be me soul, I think they'll win."

At the bottom turn into the stretch Mike could see that White Moth and the Dutchman had closed up on the Indian, so that they swung wide around the owner of the horse.

"God, she's shut off!" he muttered. It was a living wall, and through little chinks in its quivering face he could see specks of blue close up where raced Lauzanne.

"Poor girl!" he gasped, "they've got her in a pocket. Damn them boys. Why did she bug the rail? She's fair 'trowed away the last chance."

Half way up the steps stood Langdon, and his coarse, evil face took on a look of unholy joy as Lauzanne was blotted into oblivion by the front.

"Poked by God! Clever trainer, to put up a kid like that agin Westley an' the other," he sneered.

Then a deafening roar went up from the stand. Somebody thrust a pair of broad shoulders in front of Mike's face. He leaned out far past the intruder and saw the Indian yaw drunkenly in his stride away from the rail, carrying White Moth and the Dutchman out, and into the opening he had left, glued to the rail, crept the chestnut form of Lauzanne.

A wild yell of Irish joy escaped Mike. Then he waited. Now it would be a race! But Lauzanne was trying, trying all by himself, for the rider was still as death.

Already the clamor of many voices was splitting the air; all over the stand it was, "The favorite wins! The Dutchman wins!" Even yet there was no beckoning call to Lauzanne, but Mike knew. He had said to Allis before she went out, "If you ever get level wit' them in the straight you can win."

And now Lauzanne's yellow head was even with the others and soon it was in front. And then there were only two battling—Lauzanne and the Dutchman, and on the bay Westley was riding with whip and spur.

"In a walk—in a walk, I tell you!" fairly screamed Old Bill, clutching at Mortimer's arm; "didn't I tell you? We're a thousand to the good. Look at him, look at him!" He had climbed half way up Mortimer's strong back in his excitement. "Look at the kid! Never moved—in a walk, in a walk! Larcen all the way for a thousand!" His voice, generally weak and tattered, like his clothes, had risen to a shrill scream of exultation.

It was past all doubt, Lauzanne, a length in front of the Dutchman, was clear the stand; in two seconds they had flashed by the judge's box and Lauzanne had won.

The wave of humanity that swept down the steps carried Mike in its front wash. He took his stand close to the judge's box,

where he would be handy for whatever might be needed. He saw Langdon, with a face dark and lowering, full of an evil discontent, standing there.

Back the seven runners cantered. Lauzanne's rider saluted the judge with his whip, and, slipping from the horse, took the saddle and passed quickly into the scales. The weight was right. One after another the boys weighed.

Watching, Mike saw Langdon pass up to the stewards. There was a short consultation, the hush of something wrong, and a murmur of an objection.

"What's the matter?" a voice questioned in Mike's ear. It was Alan Porter who had spoken.

Mike pushed his way to the small gate, through it, that led up to the stewards' stand. As he did so, Langdon came back down the steps.

One of the stewards, following him with quick eyes, saw Mike, and beckoned with a finger.

"There's an objection to the rider of Lauzanne," he said. "The steward says Alan Porter rode the horse under a permit belonging to a boy named Mayne."

"He's mistook, sir," answered Mike, respectively. "There's Alan Porter standin' down there in the crowd. I'll find him up, an' you can ask him yourself."

Gaynor passed hurriedly down the steps, seized Porter by the arm and whispered in his ear. "Tell the judge your name, and that a boy named Mayne rode Lauzanne. Quick, now!"

Then Gaynor stepped up to Langdon. The latter had seen Alan Porter go up the steps, and realized that he had made a mistake. Mike drew him inside the little enclosure that surrounded the stand.

"There's Alan Porter wit' the stewards," Gaynor whispered, close to the man's face; "an' you can ask him yourself."

If you don't you'll have to settle wit' the stewards for tryin' to bribe the boys, Mayne, to pull Lauzanne. And Shandy has owned up that he was to get five hundred for doin' Lucretia. You'll withdraw now an' get ruled off fer life, besides, plainin' is all business an' I'll take an oath before God I can prove this, too. Now, go an' withdraw quick. You're a damn blackguard!"

Mike had meant to restrict himself to diplomatic pressure, but his Irish was up like a flash and he couldn't resist the final expression of wrath.

A crowd of silent men had gathered about the box in a breathless wait. Fortunes depended upon the brief consultation that was being held between the stewards.

As Alan Porter came down, Langdon went up the steps with nervous haste. "I've made a mistake, gentlemen," he said to the stewards. "With your permission I will withdraw the objection."

"Yes, you can ask him yourself," returned one of the stewards. "The boy has owned up and that's what racing's for. It would be a pity to spoil such a grand race on a technicality."

CHAPTER XXVII.

After winning on Lauzanne, Allis had dodged the admiring crowd of paddock regulars that followed her. As Lauzanne was being blanketed she had kissed the horse's cheek and given him a mighty squeeze of thankfulness. How nobly he had done his part; good, dear old, despoiled, misjudged Lauzanne. He had veritably saved her father from disaster, had saved her from—many things.

She had slipped into her long coat and stood waiting for Mike to drive her to Dixon's cottage, when the rumor came of an objection. Then there had been the misery of terrible suspense, a wait of uncertainty. Was her sacrifice of womanly instinct to go for nothing?

Dixon had hurried to the scene of investigation; then he had come back after a little with Mike, and the good news that they had got the race. If it had not been for prying eyes she would have knelt there at Lauzanne's feet, and offered up a prayer of thankfulness. She had done all a woman

bet. Out of all this evil positive good would accrue.

"Can you tell me," proceeded Lane, "where the balance of Mr. Porter's \$2,000 is?"

"It's in the box."

"That's a—it is not," repeated Mortimer, firmly.

"We can soon settle that point," declared the cashier, going hurriedly into the vault, and reappearing instantly with the box in his hand.

He opened it and stared at the package of bills that rose up from the pressure of the lid.

With nervous fingers he counted the contents.

"I beg your pardon," he exclaimed in a quick, jerky way. "The \$2,000 is here, but these bills have been put in the box this morning; they were not there last night. It is not the money that was taken away, either. That was one bill—a \$1,000 note, and here are"—he counted them again—"six \$100s, and eight \$50s, besides the original two of \$1,000. You put those notes back, Mr. Mortimer," he said, tapping the desk with two fingers of the right hand. "I did."

beckoning, said: "Will you step into my office for a minute?"

The cashier's one minute grew its weary length into thirty, and when Alan Porter came out again, Mortimer saw that the boy sought to avoid him. Had he denied taking the money? My God! The full horror of Mortimer's hopeless position flashed upon him like the lurid light of a destroying forest fire. He had trembled when it was a question of Alan's dishonor. Now that the ignominy was being thrust upon him the bravery that he possessed in great part faded from him. If, through his endeavor to save the boy, he was to shoulder the guilt, not of his own volition, but without hope of escape, he would stand to it like a man. What would it profit him to denounce the boy?

At 1 o'clock the president, Crane, arrived from New York, and in him was bitterness sneaking thief, Allis.

Crane was closed with the cashier's office because of his yesterday's defeat. He had sat nearly the whole night through mentally submerged in the double happening that had swept many men from his chess board. Lauzanne, the despised, had kept from his hand a small fortune, even when his fingers



"IF YOU DID NOT STEAL THE MONEY, WHO DID?"

could do, almost more. Providence had not forsaken her and her stricken father.

Then Mike had hurried her to the buggy just as Crane, leaving the beaten Dutchman and Langdon, had come, asking Dixon where Miss Porter was, that he might tender congratulations. He wanted to see the boy that had ridden Lauzanne also—wanted to take his hand and tell him what a grand race he had ridden. But Dixon had been ready with excuses; the boy, Al Mayne, was dead beat after the race—he was only a kid—and had gone to Dixon's home. Miss Porter was perhaps in the stand, or perhaps she had gone home also.

Crane knew of Langdon's objection. It was a silly thing, he said, due to over-caughtness. He had taken no part in it, he assured Dixon.

Alan Porter, too, came into the paddock, asking for his sister, but fared pretty much as Crane had. He would certainly find her at the cottage, Dixon assured him.

That night Allis wired the joyful tidings to her father and that she would be home in the morning.

At last Pandora's box, from which, for months past, evil fortune had been steadily taken at Ringwood, was emptied. From the bottom had come forth not only hope, but a prize.

Dr. Rathbone's prophecy as to the proper medication for John Porter stood a chance of being fulfilled in one day. Allis' telegram proved that the doctor had understood the pathology of Porter's treatment, for he became as a cripple who his touched the garment of a man healer.

It was thus that Allis found him when she reached Ringwood. Oh, but she was glad, and small wonder. What she had signed as nothing; it shrank into insignificance under the glamorous light of the change that had come over Ringwood.

At the bank down in the village—well, at 9 o'clock, Mortimer, feeling the virtue of an early effort, with the money of redemption in his pocket, entered into the resumption of his duties.

At the earliest moment after the vault was opened he made his way to the box that contained the Porter payment.

One thing troubled him slightly. It was a \$1,000 bill that had been taken; the money he had to replace was in hundreds and fifties.

As he slipped them quietly into the box he thought it wouldn't really matter; he would transfer the \$2,000 to the account himself, and nobody would know of the change. Leaving the box where it was for a little, in the way of subtle tragedy, he came out and busted himself over other matters.

To Mortimer's slight astonishment, presently the cashier, Mr. Lane, came out from his office, speaking with low, earnest, rapidity. "Mr. Mortimer, you have that Porter note and money in charge. It is due today, isn't it?"

Looking up, Mortimer saw Lane's eyes fixed upon his face with piercing intensity. He flushed out of sheer nervousness.

"Yes, sir," he stammered, "it is. I'll attend to it at once."

"Ah!—there was a peculiar draw in the cashier's voice as he spoke—'Ah, I had a communication from Mr. Porter asking if the note had been paid.'"

Mortimer felt his knees vibrate—something was choking him. Had the devil of mischance taken the salvation of Alan's good name out of his hands—had his work been for nothing?

"I couldn't understand it," went on the cashier. His voice sounded like the clangor of a fire bell to the listening man, though it was evenly modulated, cold and steady in its methodical precision. "I thought Porter knew the money was here to meet your attention being called to the matter. I looked up the note. I found \$1,000 missing."

He was looking steadily at Mortimer; his eyes were searching the young man's very soul. There was accusation, denunciation, abhorrence, in the cashier's gaze.

"I at once sent a messenger to ask you to return for your home at Emerson's to clear up this matter; he discovered that your note had not been there, that your mother was not ill. May I ask where you were yesterday?"

"I was at Gravesend, sir—at the race," answered Mortimer, defiantly.

This speech broke the lethargy that was over him; his brain cleared, he commenced to think easily.

"And you took the money yesterday or the day before?"

"I did not."

"Ah!" Lane repeated in a dryer, more severe tone than he had used before. This "ah" of the cashier's, with its many gradations of tone, had been a most useful weapon in his innumerable financial battles.

It could be made to mean anything, everything; hung out at haphazard, it always caught his opponent off guard. It was a subtle thrust, and while one pondered its possible meaning, Lane could formulate in his mind more decisive expressions.

"Ah," he repeated, "if you did not steal this money, who did? And if you did not take it, why did you put it back?"

With an expressive sweep of the hand toward the cashier, Mortimer, waiting, his tall, narrow head, topped by carefully brushed gray hair, thrust forward in the attitude of a parrot about to strike with its beak.

"I can't answer those questions," answered the man he was grilling. "The money to pay Mr. Porter's note is here, and I fancy that is all the bank needs to concern itself about. It was entrusted to me, and now I am prepared to turn it over."

"Quite true; ah, yes, quite true! But it might have been vastly different. That is the point that most concerns the bank. Whoever took the money—and he bowed deprecatingly with ironical consideration to Mortimer—"must have needed \$1,000 for, well—some speculative purpose, perhaps. Good fortune has enabled the someone to make good and the money has been replaced."

Mortimer bowed his head in acquiescence. What could he say—what other stand could the bank take?

"You might remain at your desk," the cashier said. "If there is any mistake we'll discover it, no doubt."

Mortimer felt like one dead, indeed as a dishonored man he were better dead. The bank was like a mausoleum and he a lost spirit haunting its precincts in quest of the undelivered body that had been his yesterday.

Alan Porter waited in suffering suspense for his appearance. What would come of it all? Now that the money was replaced, if the boy admitted his guilt to Crane, probably no further action would be taken, but he would be dishonored in the sight of his employers. Mortimer had sought to avert this, had not denounced Alan in the first instance. By good fortune he had been able to replace the money; even had he divulged the name of the thief.

He was well aware of the mass of circumstantial evidence, the outcome of his own hurried actions that pointed to himself as the guilty one. Better this than that he should denounce the boy. Dishonor to the lad might kill his father, for Mortimer was well aware of the doctor's edict.

And Allis, the girl he loved as his life, would hang her head in shame forever.

He was anxious to see Alan before the cashier did. He did not want the boy to deny taking the money at first, as he might be he were unaware of the circumstances. It would place him in a wrong light.

Just before 12 Alan Porter came hurriedly in. He had missed his train the night before he explained in a general way to all.

Mortimer stepped up to him almost at once, speaking with low, earnest, rapidity. The cashier was in his own office and Mr. Case was not within ear shot.

"I put the money back, but its loss had been discovered yesterday. I have been accused of taking it, but have denied it, accused me with no more than a 'your word'—'I'm busy,' he answered, curtly. 'I'll see you after bank hours, sir; I want to see you.'"

"I've come to pay father's note, business-of-importance," she flung back, with the swagger of a capitalist.

"It's paid, Allis."

"Paid? I thought—"

"Wait, I'll come out," and, opening the door in the hall, he passed around to the girl.

"Father's note is paid," he resumed, "but there's fierce trouble over it. Crane left the money, \$2,000, with Mortimer, and he stole it—his boy's voice was lowered to a hoarse whisper—" \$1,000 of it to bet at Gravesend."

"That's not true, Alan; God knows it's not true. Mortimer wouldn't steal."

"Yes, he did," persisted the brother, "and

he begged of me to take the blame. He said it would ruin him, but that Crane wouldn't do anything to me. He's a vile, sneaking thief, Allis!"

"Hush, Alan, don't say that. It's all some dreadful mistake. The money will be found somewhere."

"It has been found; Mortimer put it back. Why should he replace the money if he had not stolen it?"

"Where's Mr. Mortimer, Alan?"

The boy pointed with his thumb to the door of the cashier's office. "Crane's in there, too. I hope Mortimer owns up. He can't do anything else; they caught him putting the money back."

Allis remembered that she had seen Mortimer on the race course, but she couldn't believe that he'd even been betting.

"Mr. Mortimer doesn't bet," she said.

"Yes, he does; he did yesterday, anyway, and when he saw that I knew about it he begged me to say nothing, practically admitted that he had taken the money and was going to put it back."

"Why should he tell you that, Alan?"

"I don't know, unless he feared it might be found out while he was away; or perhaps he was so excited over winning a thousand dollars that he didn't know what he was saying. At any rate he took it right enough, Allis, and you ought to cut him!"

"I shan't do that. He's innocent. I know he is. I don't care what they say. If he replaced the money, it was to shield the man who took it." She was looking searchingly into her brother's eyes, not that she was accusing him of the theft; she was just searching for the truth.

"Do you mean it was to shield me that I took it? No one else could have taken the money except Mortimer or myself."

"I don't know," answered the girl, wearily; "it's all so terribly new; I only know that Mortimer did not steal it."

"While she was still speaking the accused man came from the cashier's office, holding his head defiantly erect, not at all as a half-convicted felon should have slunk through the door, yet withal in his face was a look of hopeless gravity.

As he resumed his place at the desk close to the brother and sister, Alan looked defiantly at him. He could see in the boy's eyes malignant detestation, a glimmer of triumph, as though he felt that Mortimer was irrevocably in the toils.

His attitude allied Mortimer with loathing. He stole a look into the girl's face. Would she, too, say with her eyes, "Behold here is the thief?"

A thrill of ecstatic comfort warmed his brain. In Allis' gray eyes was the first touch of kindness he had known in this hour of trial. Faith, and sorrow, and cheer, and love were all there, striving for mastery; no furtive weakening, no uncertain questioning, no remonstrance of reproval, nothing but just unlimited faith and love.

Mortimer heard the brother say, "I think you had better not," then the girl's voice, clear and decisive, answering, "I will, I must."

In anger Alan left his sister's side, and she, stepping up to the wicket, said, "Will you please come out for a minute, Mr. Mortimer? I want to speak to you."

He passed around to her side. Crane and the cashier were still closeted in the latter's office.

"Let us go out into the sunshine," Allis said. "Can you—will it make any difference?"

"I don't think it matters," he answered, wearily; "things are as bad as they can be, I suppose."

Crane granted that she knew everything, but he was possessed of no shame, no diffidence, no reserve; he was innocent, and her eyes had assured him that she knew it.

As they passed through the door it cracked again on its dry hinges. Before she had laughed at the weird complaining; now it sounded like a moan of misery.

Outside, the village street was deserted. There was no one to listen.

"What is this dreadful thing all about, George?" He started. She had never called him by his Christian name. He marveled at her generous faith. All but

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disheveled, it was as though his mother might have spoken, "George."

"A thousand dollars was stolen from the bank, and I am accused of taking it," he answered bitterly.

"You didn't, did you? I know you didn't, but I want to hear you say so."

"He looked full into the girl's eye, and answered, with deliberate earnestness, "I did not steal the money."

"You one took it?"

"Yes."

"And you know who it was?"

"I do not."

"But you suspect someone?"

"He did not answer."

"Did you put the money back?"

"He nodded his head."

"To protect somebody's good name?"

"Because it had been in my charge, I can't talk about it," he broke in vehemently; "all I can say is that I am innocent. If you believe that, I don't care what they do. They'll be able to prove by circumstantial evidence that I took it," he added, bitterly, "and nothing that I can say would make any difference. My mother won't believe me guilty, and, thank God, you don't. As for me, I am not, God knows I am not. Beyond that I will say nothing; it is useless—worse than useless, it is criminal—would only cast suspicion on others perhaps innocent. I don't know what they'll do about it; the money has been repaid. They may arrest me as a felon. At any rate, I shall be forced to leave the bank and go away. It won't make much difference. I am as I was before, an honest man, and I shall find other openings. It's not half so bad as I thought it would be. I feared, perhaps, that you would be—"

She stopped him with an imploring gesture.

"Let me finish," he said; "I must go back to the office. I thought that you might believe me a thief, and that would have been too much."

"You cared for my poor opinion?" she asked. The quiver in her voice caused him to look into her face. He saw the gray eye shrouded in tears. He was a queer thief, trembling with joy because of his sin.

"Yes, I care," he answered, "and it seemed all so dark before you brought the sunlight in with you; now I'm glad that they've accused me; somebody else might have suffered and had no one to believe in him. But I must go back to my prison. It seems like now—when I leave you, this with a weary attempt at brave mockery."

Allis laid a detaining hand on his arm, the small gloved hand that had guided Lauzanne to victory. "If anything happens—if you are going away—I think you are right to go if they distrust you—you will see me before you leave, won't you?"

"Will you care to see me if I stand branded as a thief?" The word came hard, but in his bitterness he felt like not sparing himself; he wanted to get accustomed to the full obloquy.

"Promise me to come to Ringwood before going away," she answered.

"Yes, I will, and I thank you. No matter how dark the shadow may make my life, your kindness will be a faith, a hope of light. No man is utterly lost when a good woman believes in him."

The cracking bank door wailed tremulously, irritably; somebody was pushing it open from the inside. With a white of remonstrance it swung wider, and Crane stepped out on the sidewalk. He stared in astonishment at Mortimer and Allis; his brow wrinkled in anger. Only for an instant; the forehead smoothed back into its normal placidity, and his voice, well in hand, said in even tones, "Good afternoon, Miss Porter. Are you going back to Ringwood?" and he nodded toward Allis' buggy which stood in front of the bank.

"Yes, I am. I'm going now. Good day, Mr. Mortimer," and she held out her hand. Mortimer, bestraitened, and then, flushing, took the gloved fingers in his own. Without speaking, he turned and passed into the bank.

"May I go with you?" asked Crane; "I want to see your father."

"Yes, I'll be glad to drive you over," the girl answered.

(To Be Continued.)

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