

# THOROUGHbred

By Bruno Lessing

Wherein Fate Plays a Whimsical Prank or Two, and, for Once, Gets the Worst of It.

MOTT, in moments of enthusiasm, would boast that his wife was a thoroughbred. He had once been interested in breeding horses, and the terms had retained a place in his vocabulary. He was a good natured, easy going individual, not particularly brilliant, and, above all, neither keenly analytical in his thinking processes nor finicky in his use of words. When he called his wife a thoroughbred he meant it for a compliment. The trouble about it was that he was right and never knew just how thoroughly right he was.

Those who know horses will tell you what splendid qualities ensue from long and careful breeding, such as strength, beauty, endurance, spirit, and vitality. Your poor, stodgy work horse has none of these. Yet the work horse is patient, and plods and drudges, takes things as they come with a sort of fatalistic philosophy, accepts the good of life while he stoically endures the bad, and, while he never rises to great heights, has the compensating consolation of never sinking to great depths. Whereas the thoroughbred, keyed to a high tension, is startled by his own shadow, jumps at a sound, trembles under restraint, and spends practically most of his life in a state of quivering nerves.

Mrs. Mott was a thoroughbred. Sensitive, proud, and refined, her life had, fortunately, been sheltered from every disturbing influence. Fate had dealt gently with her. She had not the faintest idea of how she would act under the stress of powerful emotion, for the reason that the depths of her emotions had never been stirred.

The Motts had been married six years, and had a single child, Lucille, who was five years old, the idol of her parents. It had been a happy marriage, or, rather, to be exact, it had been a tranquil and contented marriage. Mrs. Mott was as devoted to her husband as she felt a woman could possibly be. She loved his cheerful disposition, his kindness, and his tenderness to herself. Probably, if you had asked her what she admired most in her husband, she would have told you that it was his trustworthiness.

From which one might have deduced that Mrs. Mott was inclined to be selfish, the quality which appealed to her most being the one which gave her the greatest comfort. Of her devotion to her child, however, there was no question. It must, furthermore, be added that Mrs. Mott was twenty-six years old, slender, and exceedingly pretty.

It all began upon an evening when Mott, detained by an engineering problem at the office of the steel company by which he was employed, telephoned to his wife that he would not be home until late and suggested that, after Lucille had been put to bed, his wife call upon a friend of hers who lived in the neighborhood. It happened that this friend—a Mrs. Morris—was giving a party that evening, and there Mrs. Mott, for the first time, met Franklin Elder.

Even as he clasped her hand Mrs. Mott discerned the manner of man he was—handsome, charming, selfish, unscrupulous, and indiscriminately amorous. His adroitness amused her. He held her hand just long enough and pressed it just tenderly enough to convey to her the impression—his eyes aiding and abetting the communication—that she appealed to him. A whole volume can be expressed in a single handclasp. She smiled charmingly, and promptly dismissed him from her mind.

It was nearly an hour later when, seated alone upon a sofa, she saw him approaching. He seated himself at her side and plunged headlong into an amusing tirade against social functions which soon had her laughing. Then her husband came to take her home, and she introduced him to Franklin Elder.

The Elder type is too common to merit many words of description. Men who pursue their illicit diversions methodically, without even passion as an excuse or pretext; to whom no human ties appeal, and who, often under a pleasing exterior, conceal the ruthlessness of a beast of prey, are, unfortunately, familiar to every community.

It was just two days after Mrs. Morris' party that Mott came home quite excited. "Do you remember that chap Elder we met the other night?" he said. "Well, today he was elected a director of our company. He came into the office and shook hands with me. I'd like to have him up for dinner some night."

Within a few weeks Elder had become a frequent visitor at the Mott's household. Mott, who was entirely without guile himself, liked him exceedingly. Through Elder's influence he had been promoted to a more lucrative position, and he felt under deep obligation to him. Often, when he called, he found Mrs. Mott alone, and yet, in looking back to it all in after years, she could never remember that he had by word or act openly avowed the feelings toward her which she always knew he entertained.

She found him congenial and attractive, and as long as he kept his thoughts and desires to himself she had no fault to find with him. Lucille, her little daughter, was devoted to him. Elder had managed to ingratiate himself into the child's affections. Once he brought her a doll.

"The day before your birthday," he said, "if you'll remind me, you and I will go shopping and buy the doll new clothes. But you

mustn't tell anybody. That'll be our great secret."

And now Fate, probably feeling that the married life of the Motts had been entirely too serene, decided capriciously to take a hand in their affairs. Andrew Mott telephoned to his wife that he would not be home for dinner.

"But we've asked Mr. Elder for dinner tonight," protested Mrs. Mott.

"Awfully sorry, Katherine, but I'm up to my neck in things," replied her husband. "I'll get home as early as I can."



The receiver fell from her grasp. The walls of the room seemed to revolve in dizzy circles before her eyes.

It never occurred to her to inquire why he could not come home. She took it for granted that his office work required his attention. The idea of dining alone with Elder did not appeal to her, and she decided to invite Mrs. Morris. She was unable to find Mrs. Morris' telephone number, and, remembering that her husband kept a list of the telephone numbers of all their friends, she called up his office.

"Mr. Mott has gone for the day." For a long time she sat beside the telephone receiver thinking. Her husband's work had never taken him outside the office before. Where could he have gone? If something unusual had arisen, why had he not told her? She did not like it. Furthermore, she made no other attempt to obtain Mrs. Morris' telephone number.

That night Elder made strenuous efforts to create a pleasing impression, and succeeded admirably. The picture that he drew of his loneliness touched her sympathy. Had he cried aloud, "It is you whom I want; only you can fill the void in my life!" he could have made no clearer to her what was actually in his mind, if not in his heart. But his behavior was beyond reproach. And while she disapproved of his moral standard she could not help liking the man.

Mott gave his wife no explanation of his absence that evening, nor did she ask any questions. What she noticed, however, was that he seemed worried and ill at ease.

"Are you feeling all right?" she asked.

"Fine," he replied. "Only I've got a few things on my mind."

The fact that her husband had thoughts which he was keeping from her annoyed Mrs. Mott, or, rather, she was annoyed because he had told her that he had such thoughts without telling her what they were. She was not accustomed to being annoyed, and it made her restless. And then came the second prank of Fate.

The following night, after dinner, Mott went to his room, saying that he had some work to do. His wife remained in the sitting room reading the evening newspaper. The telephone at her side tinkled faintly, and, thinking it was about to ring, she put the receiver to her ear. She heard her husband's voice speaking from the extension in his room.

"Are you there, Alice?"

"Yes. We were cut off," replied a woman's voice.

"Now, I want you to listen carefully," she heard her husband say. "This business has got to stop—"

Mrs. Mott listened no further. She restored the telephone to its hook and sank back in her chair. She felt sick. She tried to think, but her faculties were numbed.

"When Mr. Mott comes down," she said to the maid, "tell him I've retired. I have a headache."

All that night she tossed about her bed, wondering what it was all about, worrying because her husband had secrets which he did not share with her, fearing the worst, recalling for the first time in her life how much she loved him, suffering all the pangs of jealousy, and, above all—that and that is what happens to thoroughbreds—all a-quiver with the rage that is born of outraged pride.

The details of his entanglement—her intuition told her that it was an entanglement—she did not want to know. Whether it was the remnants of an affair antedating their marriage or some liaison he had contracted recently made no difference to her. She felt deceived and humiliated, and she was accustomed to neither deceit nor humiliation. To reproach her husband or to demand an explanation from him never occurred to her. He had chosen not to discuss the matter with her; consequently she must maintain a dignified if somewhat painful silence. The stress of her emotions wore upon her and showed in the pallor of her countenance and in dark shadows under her fine eyes.

"Don't you think," suggested her husband one morning, "that you had better run off to the country for a little while—you and Lucille? You're not looking particularly rugged. Not worrying about anything, are you?"

"He'd like me to go away?" was her immediate thought. She told him, however, that it was but a passing indisposition and that she would be all right in a few days. And then Fate, which seems to love dramatic effects, threw a bombshell into Mrs. Mott's life.

"The cleaner come for Mr. Mott's suit," explained the maid, "and I give it to him. And he just brought back a paper as was in the pocket."

It was a bit of pink letter paper that the maid laid in Mrs. Mott's outstretched hand, and it reeked of cheap perfume. The writing swam before her eyes. In the twinkling of an instant the opening line, and then the signature seemed to leap from the paper to her brain.

"You poor, silly boy," it began, with "Just because you're married—" close upon it. And it was signed "Alice."

Almost mechanically Mrs. Mott handed it back to the maid.

"You had better leave it on Mr. Mott's desk," she said. And then the whole bottom dropped out of her world, and she felt that she was an entirely different creature—a being who had never existed before, exactly like Mrs. Andrew Mott to all appearances, but different inside, absolutely different. To her overwrought mind it seemed that her husband's perfidy had changed her whole nature. He had secrets from her. Very well. She would have a great secret of her own.

She dressed herself with great care, humping a gay tune the while. She felt that her mind was unusually clear and that, for the first time in her life, she saw things in their

true light. As a matter of fact, she was so entirely distraught that she had not the faintest conception of her real self or her real mood. She had already dismissed her husband from her mind. He was to play no further part in her life. The curious part of it was that she did not bestow any thought upon Elder. She merely intended to go to him.

It was a surly-looking Japanese who opened the door of Elder's apartment. No, Mr. Elder was not in. But if the honorable lady would step into the sitting room his master would probably arrive in a few minutes.

The room in which Mrs. Mott found herself was furnished with exquisite taste. Perhaps, had Elder known that she was coming, he might have removed a dozen or so of the photographs of pretty women that stood upon the table and the mantel. The Japanese servant bowed before her.

"I think maybe Mr. Elder with gentleman friend across the street. I go tell him."

Left alone, Mrs. Mott sat beside the table idly drumming upon its edge with her fingertips, a faint smile upon her lips. She felt no sensation of excitement. It seemed to her that her mind was unusually alert and clear. Her husband had deceived her—that one fact stood out beyond all others—and she was not one of those to brook deception calmly. She must teach him a lesson. Whatever happened, he would never deceive her again.

She did not even think of Elder. In a physical way he possessed absolutely no attraction for her. As a matter of simple fact, she thought of nothing and no one but her own self. It was her self that had been outraged, and it was her self that must wipe out the stain. Wipe it out, perhaps, with a greater stain. She smiled at the thought, but it was a purely mechanical smile.

The shock of this unaccustomed blow to her pride had in some unaccountable way dammed the flow of her natural feelings, cast a spell of lethargy over her sensibilities, and, for the moment, changed her entire nature.

The telephone suddenly rang. Mechanically, absent-mindedly, forgetting entirely where she was, she placed the receiver to her ear.

"Hello!"

"I want to speak to Mr. Elder," came a childish voice over the wire.

For an instant it seemed to Mrs. Mott that her heart had stopped beating.

"Who is it?" she asked faintly, and she knew the answer beforehand.

"I'm Lucille. Tomorrow's my birthday, and he's going to take me out to get clothes for my dolly."

The receiver fell from her grasp. The walls of the room seemed to revolve in dizzy circles before her eyes. All that she saw clearly was the figure of her child kneeling upon a chair to reach the telephone in her sitting room. For a moment she felt the child's arms around her neck, and the pressure almost suffocated her. The tension

snapped. Torrentlike, the pent-up force of feeling and instinct swept through her consciousness and almost overwhelmed her.

"My God!" she cried. "What am I doing?"

Groping her way as if the room were dark, she staggered from the apartment. A low moan escaped her lips.

"O, Andrew! Andrew!" she murmured, half sobbing. She never remembered just how she reached the street. There was a taxicab passing, and she hailed it. She almost stumbled into it, gasped her address to the driver, and it started off just as Elder, with his Japanese servant running to keep pace with him, reached the door. He recognized her, gazed in stupefaction at the departing taxicab, and hastened to his apartment. Perhaps she had left a note for him.

He found the telephone receiver hanging over the edge of the table. Beside it lay Mrs. Mott's handbag. He gazed at it for a long time, and then he smiled.

"Here, Otami," he said. "Wrap this up in paper and take it to Mrs. Mott's house."

It had been a narrow escape. By the time she reached her home Mrs. Mott's faculties had returned to their normal state. The tension had relaxed, her vision had cleared, and the unrealities which had filled her mind had vanished. In their place, however, had come a realizing sense of the enormity of her conduct which filled her with horror. She felt ashamed, humiliated, and afraid. Afraid that she had within her the possibility of such an outrageous outburst as the one which had nearly swept her away.

"I must be crazy!" she kept repeating to herself, over and over again. She felt an impulse to throw herself at her husband's feet and implore his forgiveness. At that moment he could have confessed to her that he had twenty mistresses, and she would not have cared. She felt that she had stultified herself to such an extent that, no matter what he did, he was vastly her superior. For the first time in her life Mrs. Mott tasted a sense of humility. Which is very disagreeable to thoroughbreds.

She decided that it would be folly to tell her husband. He could have his Alice, could have all the Alices he wanted, but it would surely make him unhappy to know that his wife was such a weakling. No, she would not tell him. What had ever possessed her, anyway? He could never understand—she could hardly understand it herself—and it was much better to try to forget it all. She would strive in every way to make him happy, she would devote the rest of her life to atonement for that terrible impulse.

Otami, the Japanese servant, refused to give the package to the maid who came to the door. He insisted upon placing it in Mrs. Mott's hands. And when Mrs. Mott gazed into his surly face and saw, or thought she saw, a laughing gleam in his eyes, she shuddered. She tasted fear.

Elder she never thought. What he might say or think did not interest her. In a vague, wordless fashion, she felt that, no matter how bad he was, he must surely have sufficient chivalry in his nature to remain quiet. If he should presume upon the incident and make advances to her she would know how to conduct herself when the time came.

All that Mott observed when he came home was that his wife had recovered her former gaiety and was more gracious than ever. Her nervousness and the after effects of the strain she had been through escaped his notice. He remarked upon her improved color, and Mrs. Mott, with a sigh of relief, felt that the episode had ended. And that night when it came time for Lucille to go to bed her mother almost smothered her with kisses. It was Lucille who had saved her from herself.

Fate, however, seemed to take a fiendish delight in keeping the ball a-rolling. The Mott's household had returned to its normal status; Mott's worries seemed to have disappeared, and his wife had become accustomed to forgetting her episode. She was no longer afraid, even, of Elder. From time to time he came to the house, and Mrs. Mott faced him without embarrassment.

She had made up her mind that if he ever referred to the incident she would say that she had called upon him for advice in regard to an investment. The trouble was that she could not bring herself to volunteer that explanation to her husband. Elder, however, never referred to the matter. He was something of a fatalist: if she wanted to come to him she would come—there was nothing to be gained by talking about it.

And so matters stood until one day the maid handed her a note. It was from Otami, the Japanese servant, asking for \$10 to send to his parents.

The letter was badly written. "Honorable Lady," it began. "My father and mother is in poor poverty circumstances in Japan, and I must go to send them money. Ten dollars will be enough this time. I am a good friend. Very respectfully, Otami. If you give it to the door servant I call for it."

The surly face of the Japanese, with a malicious gleam in his eyes, rose before Mrs. Mott's mental vision and made her tremble. Almost instinctively she gave the money to the maid to be handed to the Japanese. Was this to be the end of it or was she to be subjected to steady blackmail by a servant? Had she better tell Elder of it? Would it not be best to make a clean breast of the whole matter to her husband? For a week she worried over it, and then came another letter asking for \$10 more, which threw her into a panic.

Mott observed his wife's agitation, but attributed it to physical nervousness. His kindness to her and his sollicitude for her welfare filled her with a sense of shame which she could hardly bear.

"O, what a fool I've been!" she told herself, over and over again. "He never could possibly deceive me as wickedly as I'm deceiving him!"

And then came Fate's last prank, which upset her completely. Her maid announced a woman visitor.

"She says you don't know her and she wants to see you personal."

The visitor was young, rather pleasing in appearance, and seemed intensely nervous.

"I am Mrs. Armstrong," she explained. "I'm terribly worried, and I've come to you because you're a woman, to ask you if you won't help me out. My husband works in the same office with Mr. Mott and they are close friends. I—I am anxious to get a divorce because I know my husband has deceived me, but the lawyer told me I must have evidence to prove it. Mr. Mott could give me the evidence, because he has been helping my husband out. I know that for a fact. I went to him yesterday in his office, but he refused to discuss the matter with me at all. Couldn't you help me out?"

"But what can I do?" asked Mrs. Mott, in bewilderment. "Are you sure you are not making a mistake? I really know nothing about the matter."

"No, I am making no mistake," said the woman, bitterly. "My husband had an affair with some woman named Alice, and they had some kind of trouble in which your husband tried to help him out. I am living with my mother now, and I want a divorce. If your husband knew how terribly unhappy I was, I am sure he would help me. But he would not listen to me. If you would only speak to him."

The woman began to cry, and Mrs. Mott, greatly agitated, promised to speak to her husband about the matter. After her visitor had gone she sat, with hands clasped, gazing blankly before her. Her husband had not deceived her at all. It was another man's affair, which probably he had had no right to discuss with her. The last vestige of excuse for her terrible conduct had vanished, and she now realized that she had only her own impulsive temper and her stupidity to blame.

And while she sat there, panic stricken, as if an abyss had opened before her feet, her husband came home. With a wild cry she threw her arms around his neck.

"O, Andrew! Andrew!" she cried. "I can't stand it! I'm going mad! It's terrible, terrible! I've got to tell you. But I'm so ashamed! So ashamed!"

He patted her hair, soothingly. He saw that she was unstrung, but attributed it to some trivial household matter. He drew her to a couch and sat beside her, holding her head upon his shoulder.

"Surest thing you know," he said. "Telling me all about it is the best cure. Now, just take your time, dearie, and then fire ahead. And don't worry. Life's too short to worry."

With her face buried upon her husband's shoulder, Mrs. Mott, falteringly, told her story.

"I was simply crazy. I hardly remember how I felt or what I thought. I was like another creature, but I thought I was justified at the time. I wanted to punish you. I didn't even know that I was so terribly jealous."

She made no attempt to explain why she had gone to Elder rather than to any other man she knew. There are thoughts and impressions which no daughter of Eve has ever brought herself to divulge. With her face averted, Mrs. Mott could not see the frown that gathered upon her husband's forehead or the tense drawing together of his lips.

"Did Elder ever say anything—do anything—?"

"O, no! No. Never! Not a single word. But everybody can see the kind of man he is—I would have gone to anybody. I was desperate—insane. I'm the only one to blame."

And at that moment the maid announced that Otami, the Japanese servant, was at the door. Mott sprang to his feet.

"Don't move!" he said, sharply. When he returned, a few minutes later, his wife saw that there was blood upon his hand. She uttered a faint scream.

"Nothing to bother about," said Mott, now thoroughly calm. "It's merely from his nose. He won't bother us any more."

He stood for a while, gazing at his wife and scratching his head.

"Armstrong is rid of his Alice," said he, "and if you will be so good as to leave the matter alone and not pass judgment on it, I'm sure everything will be patched up in a few days."

"Yes, dear," said Mrs. Mott meekly. "As to the other matter, I guess point number one is that we had better cut out Elder."

"I was thinking—" began Mrs. Mott.

"Yes," said her husband. "That's point number two. I wish you would cut out a lot of that thinking and let me do it for you."

Then Mrs. Mott began to cry—not wildly or hysterically—but in an orderly, feminine fashion, which immediately made her husband feel he was entirely in the "wrong." But when he had kissed her tears away and had told her that she could do all the thinking she wanted, she threw her arms about him.

"No, dear," she said, "you're perfectly right. As long as you love me I want you to think for me."

"I always said you were a thoroughbred," said he. And he was right. Only he never will know how right he was.

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