

Only Borrowed

A Race Lost and a Race Won

Very early in my professional life, and therefore a great many years ago, I was consulted by a gentleman of large fortune, well known on the turf, under the following singular circumstances. It seemed that my informant, in the course of that year, had a race-horse, which was first favorite for one of the great races, and that this horse had broken down most suspiciously while almost in the act of winning the race. The owner—I may call him Mr. Stanton, although that was not his real name—was exceedingly annoyed and disgusted, and particularly displeased with his trainer and jockey, by whom the animal was ridden. He resolved to dismiss the jockey, break up his stables, and give up the turf altogether.

The jockey, whose name was Tom. White, had previously stood very well in the racing world, as a keen and honest lad. He had been distressed beyond measure at his failure, and had shed bitter tears in the moment of defeat. He assured Mr. Stanton that the accident must have been owing to foul play—that the horse had been got at somehow—and that without greater precautions than had been used, no gentleman need attempt to train.

Mr. Stanton believed that this was substantially true, but was not firmly convinced that Mr. Tom. White was not unacquainted with the source of the calamity. He therefore remained firm to his resolution of selling his stud, and dismissing White, which last he did. Tom. got an engagement in the North, and left that district of country altogether.

Tom made but little remonstrance against his dismissal. What he most seemed to feel was leaving the yearling colts, in which he had taken much pride, and in particular one of which he had great expectations, and had called, on his own account, the “Red Rover.” He was rather a bony, shapeless animal, and the judges thought little of him; but Tom, who revered no one’s opinion but his own, was always loud in his praises to his master. His last words, as he was leaving, were: “Don’t ’ee sell the couts, squoire—don’t ’ee sell ‘Red Rover,’—he be a rare ’un, he be;” and with this friendly caution, Tom White went out on his way, and was seen no more.

In the spring following, Mr. Stanton advertised his stud for sale. Two days before the time appointed, the stud groom presented himself to Mr. Stanton, while at breakfast, with a face of ashy paleness and trembling limbs.

“Please, sir, ‘Red Rover’ be stole,” was all his faltering tongue could express.

“‘Red Rover’ stolen! That is impossible, my lad. He was locked up in the stable last night—I saw it done myself.”

“They be off wi’ him this morning, anyhow,” said the lad. “His stall was empty when we went at 7 o’clock, and we can’t see him nowhere.”

Although Mr. Stanton had not the same exalted opinion of “Red Rover’s” capacity that Tom White had, he thought him a promising colt, but so utterly unformed as hardly to have tempted a “professional” to such an act. But the audacity of the theft made him very indignant, and he determined to find out the perpetrator.

The examination of the premises threw no light on the mystery, excepting that it became certain that, however accomplished, the theft had not been committed by violence. Nothing was broken—nothing out of order. The locks were entire, and the head man in the stables corroborated the lad in attesting that the doors were found locked in the morning.

Such was the tale with which Mr. Stanton resorted to my advice. No clue whatever could be found to the perpetrator, unless the ordinary and simple one, that the stable servants had connived at the theft. But Mr. Stanton owned that there had been nothing in their manner to warrant this suspicion, although he was entirely at a loss to account for the outrage on any other supposition.

I did all I could under the circumstances. I advertised far and wide; I warned the great railway lines, and employed the most eminent detective when Scotland Yard could furnish. But not the slightest trace could be discovered, excepting that a man had been stopped at Hexham, with a colt of which he would give no satisfactory account; but, as it was a grey, and “Red Rover” was a reddish-brown, the magistrate not only would not detain the man, but reprimanded the police for apprehending him when they had the description of the stolen horse in their hands.

Nothing had been heard of Tom White since his departure, nor did any one know whither he had gone. It did cross Mr. Stanton’s mind that if Tom White had been in the district he was not unlikely to have been of use in the inquiry. But no one had seen or heard of him, and Mr. Stanton was obliged to content himself with a second dismissal of his servants. The detective was always under the impression that the man at Hexham was truly the thief, and made no secret of his opinion that the magistrate who liberated him was a donkey; but he was a taciturn potentate by nature, and never condescended to explain a clue which he had nevertheless followed up until it broke.

Two years afterwards there was some curiosity excited at one of the great races of the year about a horse which was so completely “dark” as to be almost out of the betting altogether. The name of the owner under which he ran was a turf-name assumed for the occasion; but he was understood to be the property of, or at least to be vouched for by a well-known half-squire, half-trainer. But what he was, or where he was, no one knew. The “outs” were utterly at fault. They could not discover the place at which he was training, and as no efforts they had made had led to any result, unfriended as the animal was by backers, there was considerable expectation created on his appearance.

The horse could not be heard of the night before. “Deserter” had not reported himself. But when the ground was cleared for the preliminary canter he appeared, and great was the rush to the front to see him. The first glimpse of him showed he was formidable; the long swinging, well extended stride with which he took his canter impressed all the knowing ones. He was large and sinewy, powerful as well as handsome, but his color was a kind of mottled chestnut, such as is

rarely found in the thoroughbreds. Mr. Stanton was there, and, to his surprise, saw his old friend, Tom White, mounted on the cynosure of the day.

The race was never in doubt. The stranger, hard held, remained behind the front horses until 300 yards from the post, and then, let out, ran home by himself, amid the shouts and acclamations of the multitude.

The race over, “Deserter” vanished as mysteriously as he came, and in spite of Mr. Stanton’s inquiries, no tidings of Tom White could be discovered.

A week afterwards a groom arrived at Mr. Stanton’s, leading a reddish-brown thoroughbred of great power, and delivered to Mr. Stanton a note to the following effect:

“*Mr. Stanton*—SIR: I send you back the ‘Red Rover,’ as I borrowed two years ago. I knew he could do it, if I got him away from the nobblers. So I borrowed him, and I beg your pardon if it was wrong. I have paid into your bank for you £2,500, which was the stakes, and I hope you will overlook the time when ‘Revenge’ was nobbled.

Your most obedient servant,

T. WHITE.

“I am off to Australia, and have made a pretty penny by the ‘Deserter,’ which was ‘Red Rover.’”

However irregular Tom White’s way of doing business was, of course, after such a result, Mr. Stanton could hardly find fault with it. He sent me the note, and begged me to find Tom White and learn some more particulars; and with some difficulty I found him at Liverpool about to sail for Australia. When I assured him I had no hostile intentions, but quite the contrary, he gave me a full account of his proceedings. I translate Tom’s Doric into vernacular.

“You see, sir,” said Tom, “‘Revenge’ he was nobbled. Not that I knows who did it, but I knows no other scoundrel but one who could have done it. I punched his head handsome for it, however, soon after. But I durst not have split, and had to go; and serve me right. Only it broke my heart to lose the race and leave ‘Red Rover.’”

“There’s a many people,” said Tom, “thinks they’re judges of a horse. Them swells think it and snobs, and knowing coves of the ring. Lord bless you, sir, they knows nothing. They goes, and they looks, and feels, and tries a walk and a gallop, and looks wise, and thinks they are fly to everything. If you want to learn about a horse, you must see him all day and every day. They are like the women, sir. Unless you see them in all weathers you will never know anything about them; and even then it is not enough to trust to. I knowed ‘Red Rover.’ He was a rough ’un to look at, and no one but myself had a though of what he could do. But I knew that for his age he was a flyer and a stayer such as I never mounted afore.

“Well, I hears that ‘Red Rover’ was to be sold. I was mortal sorry, for I thought to myself that he would help the squire win back the money he lost on ‘Revenge.’ But selling was a thing I could not suffer. So I resolved to steal him—for the squire.

“This was the way on it. When I was a bit of a boy, I used to travel with Ducrow, and learned a secret or two in horse painting worth knowing. None of your stupid dyes, that you may see when the sun shines, making the coat hard and stary, like a plastered gable. This is a thing that won’t wash off. Nothing takes it off but a preparation which is a part of the secret. So I steals ‘Red Rover’—walked him off easy at 2 in the morning, for I had a key of my own—rode him forty miles across the country to a quiet place I knew of, and painted him a splendid grey. It was really, sir, a pretty thing to look at. We then set out together for Scotland; and barring that sharp nosed bobby in Hexham, who must have been up to the dodge himself, no one challenged me. It would have done your heart good to have heard the jolly beak pitching into the bobby that a grey horse could not be a chestnut.

“I was then serving a master who was training another horse on the sly across the border. I put him up to my plan; and he went shares, as a gentleman should. And now you have my tale.”

The matter was kept very close at the time. Mr. Stanton made some inquiry to ascertain whether “Deserter’s” rather eccentric proceedings were in conformity with the Jockey Club; but he found everything square in that respect, and thought it unnecessary to take any further steps.

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