

"OIL IN THE CAN."

The Race Story, from "The Belle of the Blue Grass," by H. D. Pittman.
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HO for "The Races"! Lexington had not yet subsided from the excitement of the barbecue, before the annual racing meet was inaugurated.

My trip over the river was not, therefore, as quiet and devoid of incident as I had anticipated. The stage was overcrowded, and it was only by accompanying McClusky around to the stable, that I secured the coveted seat beside him on top.

Not only was the stage full, but every available turnout, carriage, buggy, wagon, anything on wheels, was pressed into service and made to do duty for that occasion. It was the barbecue over again, minus the political enthusiasm and parade.

There was enthusiasm, and to spare—but of a different character. Groups of men were gathered together at every street corner discussing excitedly something.

That "Something" had all of the ear marks of a secret conspiracy, for no one spoke above a whisper.

I had not intended to go on to Lexington, but I had not been long with McClusky before I was changing my mind. No one could have listened to his seductive discourse concerning the glories of the race track and racing in general, without coming to the same conclusion. To miss a good horse race at Lexington was to lose one of the opportunities of my life.

"That's whar you'll see hosses as is hosses; sich hosses as you never befo' saw in your life, an' never will see ag'in, unless you keep on goin' to the Lexington races, which I don't put past you by any means. It'll be the grandes' sight of your life."

He told me of the origin of the races; how a few fine old Virginia gentlemen transplanted on Kentucky soil, had first met to match horses as they did in Virginia as early as the seventeenth century. How these meetings became annual and general, bringing all of the fine horses in the state once each year to Lexington.

He told me of the magnificent racing establishments now planted all about the little inland city on the finest farms, with stables like palaces; for it had been discovered that there was something in these blue grass lands, with its understratum of limestone, that produced such bone and sinew as could be found nowhere else in the world.

He told me of an English nobleman, Lord Alexander, who had established near by "the finest racing stable in the world," having the finest imported thoroughbreds in his stalls. Everything of the finest, like all these Kentuckians, no matter where you meet them.

He told me of the evolution of the farmers' horse show into the race track—exclusively for men, at first. "But you know," he added, "nothing can flourish an' git along without the woman in it, and it warn't long till they begin to go two or three of them in bunches in their carriages, which they drew up to the track 'bout whar the grand stand is now, and it warn't long befo' they all broke in just like they did at the cattle shows, and now it's hard to tell whether it's mostly a hoss show, or a woman show. They'll be thar, Col. Claiborne, Miss Lisbeth, and all the rest uv them. You can't miss it; the grandest sight in the world."

Of course this decided me. I resolved to go. Back of me I heard the men talking under their breath about a "Sure thing." At Shakertown they got out "to stretch their legs," they said. I took the opportunity to ask McClusky what was this "Sure thing" they were talking about.

"Well, you see, it's this way. Cap'n Phil not long ago saw hitched up to a ole farm wagon what seemed to him like a promisin' young hoss, an' he bought him from the nigger that owned him for forty or fifty dollars, maybe more, to drive to his buggy; you see he's a mighty fine lawyer, an' practices law in all the County courts round 'bout here, and the Circuit court, too, for that matter, an' needs a spry horse. Well, he finds this horse a little spryer than he thought fur, an' didn't keer much 'bout usin' him that away, an' the hoss a-gettin' fat an' sassy. So his boys,—all three of 'em, what got home from the war safe an' sound,—even though they wuz along with their pappy, who wuz with Morgan,—all through the war,—sp'illin' fur somethin' to do, laid out a track

all around that little meadow close to town, what I showed you as we come along,—and put that horse in training. They called him 'Oil in the Can,' and them as has seen him says he is greased lightnin'.

"These people are all crazy 'bout him, and they are going to bet on him. They ain't talkin' out loud 'bout him, 'cause they don't want the bookmakers to find out just what he kin do.

"They bin practicin' him mostly befo' daylight of mornin', and they've all been settin' like crows on the fences watchin' him, with their stop-watches in their hands. Now thar's a tip fur you, an' I don't charge nothin' for it.

"Say"—after a moment's thought, reaching down in his pocket—"of course you're a stranger to me, but I'm gwinter trust you with this five dollar bill to put on 'Oil in the Can' at the best odds you kin git,"—looking me square in the eye.

Gratified at the compliment to my squareness, I accepted the trust with some misgivings, for I had not much confidence in "Oil in the Can," pitted against the horses of which he had been telling me. I said something to this effect, but his village pride was aroused, and giving me a knowing wink, he answered:

"Old Phil can't be fooled. I happen to know he's backing him as well as the boys. You put that bill just as I tell you."

Arrived at Lexington, I found the town buzzing like a bee hive. The hotels were all crowded, for as McClusky had told me, here were people from all parts of the country gathered together to do homage to the equine kings and queens of the turf.

Southern people, summering in the North, had made it convenient to pass this way and stop for the races. People from the North and East and the West were all here, and not a few foreigners, for all other horses had gone down in the battle for supremacy before the Kentucky racers.

On the evening before the inaugural race, the office of the Phoenix was converted into a pool room, for the auction of chances upon the horses; only favorites were largely dealt in. I heard nothing of "Oil in the Can." His supporters stood aside, dumb as oysters, making no wagers on the favorites, evidently they were reserving their strength for their favorite. I fingered with apprehension, McClusky's bill, which seemed to be burning a hole in my pocket.

The following day, all roads seemed to lead to the race track. By eleven o'clock, the streets were congested, for every highway leading from the country was thronged with people hurrying into town. The railroad brought in numerous excursion trains, conveying thousands of people,—strangers from all over the state, and the United States. By twelve o'clock the mixed multitude had all converged into the principal street leading to the track; hacks, omnibuses, carriages, wagons, the negro drivers, all excitement, cracking their whips shouting, racing, barely escaping running into each other by the narrowest margins. The sides of the road were thronged with pedestrians, men, women, and children, negroes and white people, an indiscriminate mass, all of them powdered so thickly with the white lime stone dust raised in such clouds by the passing vehicles, that one could scarcely get his breath. They did not seem to mind it, for they were all eager to get there, and get good places, even if they had not the wherewithal for the grand stand.

A little later, the family carriages began to roll out in a mere leisurely fashion, for the occupants had their places secure, either reserved on the grand stand, or the carriages to be drawn up at a most desirable point on the green lawn to observe the great trials of speed and endurance.

There was a medley of voices shouting, and a rushing to and fro, until the hour approached for the first race when a rush of expectation began to settle upon the people. Then I had leisure to look around, and mark, with appreciation, the beautiful picture presented in this incongruous gathering of people from all walks of life.

It was the warmest hour of the afternoon. Not a leaf stirred; not a shadow flickered over the green sward. The sun shone steadily upon the hot, perspiring thousands, seated and unseated around the track.

Naturally my eyes sought out the point of vantage allotted to the ladies. There they were, in all of their bravery of satins and silks and laces and ribbons; filmy white muslins over silken petticoats of pink or blue, or cherry or yellow; parasols and fans to match; picture hats and poke bonnets abloom with flowers of every hue! a picture for the artist, if only one had been there. With their frills and their laces and embroideries they were adorable.

It was not long before I placed the Claiborne carriage with Lizbeth on the high seat surrounded by her admirers, sitting there in the cool green light, against the somber background of the trunk of a great tree, with her pink frock and delicate laces, and picture hat, and white sunshade, what a study for a picture, if only I were the painter.

The horses for the first race having now made their appearance in the paddock, the excitement began to rise to fever heat in the vast throng, for I was in that portion of the amphitheater occupied chiefly by men, and near me was the ring where the money changed hands. For this race I was only a spectator, and had full opportunity to observe with interest when the trial was on, the red-faced, excited men crowding down to the front rail, standing upon their seats, shouting, cheering, appealing to horse and rider by name, to "come on"; almost pulling them forward by mere force of their will power to the finish. Then came the reaction.

By this time the grand stand was crowded. The usual good nature, characteristic of these people stood the test well. Women had their filmy skirts almost torn off of them. Sleeves were literally torn out of men's coats, feet were trampled upon; hats were knocked off, but a good natured apology set everything right. I had ample time to observe everything, for "Oil in the Can" was not down until the third race.

Seeing my interest, there was no lack of friendly country men, and dusky negroes, professing to be fresh from the stables, eager to put me on to a "good thing." Not one of them mentioned my horse.

When the time came, I made my way as best I could through the crowd to the betting stand. Here was excitement! To my surprise, I found "Oil in the Can" entered for the great event of the day. Coatless, hatless men, negroes, gentlemen with silk hats and kid gloves, farmers were all struggling in the mass of humanity to gain the bookmaker's attention; thrusting their money upon him, fives, tens, hundreds, but not one of them was taking a chance on my horse.

"What's the odds on 'Oil in the Can?'" I asked flushing a little, for this was my first venture in the betting line.

A derisive shout went up from the multitude which seemed to influence the bookmaker, for he smiled and answered:

"Anything you like. One hundred dollars if you say so!"

I kissed McClusky's bill good bye, figuratively and passed it up. He handed me down a ticket marked *five hundred dollars*, saying, "Might jest as well have made it five thousand." "Take good keer uv it." "Don't lose it," shouted the crowd.

"I'll take a few like that," said a country man standing by, "at a bargain like that," and he passed up five five dollar bills; his hoarding taken right out of bank.

"Plenty more at the same price," shouted the bookmaker, greatly to the amusement of the crowd. Some more were disposed of before I could edge my way back to the grand stand, and I noticed the Harrodstown crowd slipping around from stand to stand buying up bargains on "Oil in the Can."

When I reached a point of vantage, the horses were already in the paddock, being rubbed down by their grooms. There were four of them. To my inexperienced eyes there was no choice between them. "Oil in the Can" I singled out by the jockey wearing the Confederate colors. He was a bright sorrel. The others were bays or chestnuts.

Pretty soon the jockeys with their saddles on their arms were weighed, and the horses resaddled, and they were lined up before the starter, amid a perfect roar of enthusiasm, the names of the favorites called, and cheered by the multitude. Each individual seemed to have a preference which he wanted to express in no uncertain tones. I alone failed to speak out, and I felt sorry for the utter neglect with which my choice was received.

This uproar was followed by the dead silence of expectancy, when the jockeys having received their instructions lined their horses up, alert for the