Love and Polo

BY GEORGE HIBBARD.

The Westmead team was not happy. Individually the members were in low spirits; collectively the organization presented a picture of despair. The blow had been sudden and unexpected. Without warning the shock had come and left the club paralyzed. If an earthquake had upheaved the smooth level of the shorn polo field the surprise could not have been more complete, the consternation greater.

Yet none of the usual ills had befallen. No dire epizootic had spread through the stables disabling one pony after another until all were unfit for service. The finances of the institution were in a flourishing condition—as was naturally the case with the Westmead membership. The record already made in the summer's play needed no excuse, and indeed was decidedly encouraging. In fact the club had never known a more successful and prosperous season. The animals bought in the spring had all turned out unusually well. Most unprecedented, several players had been heard to speak well of their mounts. The line of cups on the smoking room mantelpiece had received important additions. Even Brownlee, who played substitute, had apparently become convinced that obstinacy was not the best policy. When thundered at by the captain to do a thing he had often done it. At least no one had called him a "mule" for at least ten days, which had materially added to the general serenity.

A cloud, however, had arisen and dulled the bright September sunshine. That no apprehension had been felt was only natural. Miss Winifred Norris could only be considered a radiant vision, and at her appearance to have regarded her as anything else would have been manifestly absurd. Still no larger than her little hand neglected warnings had shown upon the club horizon.

"One might have known it," grumbled Lathom, who played No. 2, "when he was seen at the Lindsays in the morning."

"And he was late for the game because he was riding with her," complained Willoughby, No. 3.

"Sherwin of all men," groaned Raikes, No. 1.

"It catches the best and I believe takes 'em the worst."

"See the change."

"No man can fall in love and play polo," announced Brownlee axiomatically.

Indeed the fortnight during which Miss Norris had been in Westmead had worked a wondrous alteration in "Dick" Sherwin, No. 4 and captain. Both in habits and manners was he different. The evening hardly ever found him at the Country club, unless something was going on at which Miss Norris was present. An unnatural silence, not to say moroseness, was too readily discoverable in the everyday behavior. At polo his conduct was even more remarkable. To be sure, each game was marked by desperate rushes—and spectacular plays on his part. But there was not the solid, consistent work to which the others were accustomed. The steadiest player had become the most erratic. He appeared to have lost interest in team work altogether. Constantly, instead of calling his directions inconspicuously from "back," he had ridden in to take the ball himself. Without regard for the best tactics of the situation he had carried it headlong down the field to the admiration of the crowd.

"It may be magnificent, but it is not polo," said Raikes, shaking his head.

"It's all gallery play," denounced Lathom. "Just for the benefit of the girl in the Lindsay victoria."

"And the match with the Eastleas next week."

"Disgraceful," declared Willoughby vigorously. "Only a man in love would be such an idiot."

The serene unconsciousness of Miss Norris only aggravated the seriousness of the situation. With innocent eyes, which appeared to see nothing of the commotion, she increased it by the pleasure with which she welcomed Sherwin upon all occasions. None could condemn her conduct as showing undue encouragement, and yet the simple cordiality with which she always treated him brought him more completely into subjection. That she was flirting with him in a most scientific manner was undeniable. A man with his years of untamed bachelor freedom might easily have taken fright. Miss Norris' system was unexcelled. She arranged that he should become accustomed to control gradually. There was no point at which he was allowed to shy. He was guided round each corner with marked skill. Only when the way was clear was he given his head.

"Winifred," said Mrs. Lindsay suddenly as one day she sipped her tea on the club terrace. The afternoon's play was over. The men had gone to the dressing room for "showers" and rehabilitation. In a few moments they would be back. To Miss Norris' hostess the moment seemed opportune for the saying of what was on her mind.

"Yes," answered Winifred, looking up with the gently inquiring gaze which so often had wrought such havoc.

"Don't look at me in that way," said the other. "It's all thrown away. I am not to be distracted."

"What is it?" Winifred asked laughingly with the ready acknowledgment with which she always met the discovery of her manifest iniquities.

"This will not do," Mrs. Lindsay announced decidedly. "You are leading Dick Sherwin a dance—"

"You speak as if I were a kind of Pied Piper—"

"Any way, the piper has always got to be paid—and there's the mischief to pay here. It might be all right if he were a younger man, and there's the team—"

"What have I to do with the team?" the girl asked uneasily.

"You know," replied the other severely, "that Dick Sherwin is the mainstay and backbone and head and front and sum and substance of the Westmeads. He's the only man who has a handicap of seven goals. On his playing in a game everything depends. Now the match with the Eastleas is coming on. Don't you want us to win?"

"Yes," declared the girl earnestly.

"I thought," said Mrs. Lindsay, "that you had been here long enough to have a right feeling about it. To have developed a proper amount of loyalty. Now what are you doing? You are just disqualifying our best man and destroying all our chance of victory."

"I'm not doing anything," protested Miss Norris.

You may say that, but you know better. The way you flirt with him! The way you encourage him! His head is completely turned. Look at the insane manner in which he plays just to attract your attention. You should be very sorry for making such mischief.

"Yes," said the girl meekly.

The men came trooping down. Among the first Sherwin sauntered up with an elaborate air of detachment but with an unswerving certainty of ccurse direct to the balustrade beside Miss Winifred Norris' chair.

"I merely wished to observe," he said, "that a human being is present."

"Oh, is that you?" she asked, turning slightly.

"Tea is supposed to be soothing," he continued, "but after this unkind reception I do not think it would have any effect upon my feelings."

"You mean you want some," she replied briskly. "I'm sure Mrs. Lindsay will make it for you. Edith," she said, addressing that lady, "Mr. Sherwin wants some tea and I know you'll give it to him."

Sherwin looked at the girl in surprise.

"Little Slam cut his knee this afternoon. Won't you walk to the stables while I look at him."

"The sun is too hot," Miss Norris observed.

As the hour was 7 on a June evening and long shadows were lying across the club terrace, Sherwin got down from the railing and with his hands in his pockets, forgetting to light a cigarette, took his way through the gardens to the stable courtyard. The manner in which he banged the stable door brought the entire force to attention at once.

Wednesday was the next "polo day." Usually Sherwin brought Miss Norris to the club in an automobile in which she sat during the game—sometimes even "keeping time" to her great delight. At 4 o'clock, however, Mrs. Lindsay arrived in the victoria with Winifred beside her. Twenty minutes later Sherwin came in his machine. The horn, even as he blew it at the wagon delivering stores, seemed to sound with an angry impatience.

The game was the last before the Eastlea match only two days away. In a short line down the western side of the field stood the traps and carriages of the club supporters of the team. At the head was the Farnham coach. In groups along the boards were enthusiasts and players who had gradually with years given place to those now cantering over the field. Their heads were together. They discussed men and ponies—with that criticism which is the last resort of broken down athletes—the only solace and excitement left when they may no longer take their turn in the arena. The whole affair was of something the nature of a dress rehearsal. A performance meant as a test of the form of the performers and ponies.

Mrs. Lindsay stood up in the victoria resting her hand upon Winifred's shoulder.

"Curious," she said. "Dick doesn't seem to have seen us. At least he has not come to speak to us. And he always comes. I wonder if I had better call him."

"No, don't interrupted Winifred.

"Perhaps you're right," announced Mrs. Lindsay thoughtfully. "He hasn't seen you since Monday. I know, and the influence might have worked off. Oh," she cried, as if with a sudden illumination, "was that the reason that you were so horrid to him? To make him less idiotic to—bring him to his senses——"

The girl blushed.

"Wouldn't it be vain of me to say so," she began.

"Not when you know that he is in love head over heels and the ears of his pony. Oh, you—angel. You martyr. You—you patriot. You good man who saved the city. You should have a cup all for yourself, if the club wins, and I'll see they give it to you."

"I try to please," said Winifred modestly.

"Only, of course, nothing can be said," Mrs. Lindsay continued. "But I understand. And it's for Dick's good. And, of course, it's only till after the game. Then he may be as silly as he pleases. But with all depending on him he hasn't the right to give you all his time and the thought. There! They are lining up. Oh, how pretty it is. As many times as I have seen it I am never tired of it. The smooth, green field. The darling ponies. The men looking so strong and well. The color. The movement. There is nothing like it. There is life and vigor and excitement. It always goes to my head. And I know that you feel just as I do. There's nothing so good as pole. I can understand a man's adoring it and forgetting everything else for it. Yes, if you have made Dick lose interest in the game he must be in love with you, only he mustn't now. Now they're off. There, old Jim Conyers has thrown the ball. How his bones must crack. I'm sure that he feels as if he were playing again. He's always so proud when he can do so much. I think he watches for the chance like one of the little caddy boys. Sam Raikes is riding Chicane. He told me that he threatened to go lame. That's the roan he bought from the Fair Out's. Gracious, Billy Willoughby has the chestnut which he can't do anything with! I hope he doesn't mean to use her in the match. She just plays with Billy instead of Billy playing with her. Dick Sherwin's on the one that gave him the bad fall last year. Missed his feet and went over. A most unpleasant sight. He used to be ball shy, but Dick's got him over that. Now they're away. They should wipe the field, as Tom says, with the scrub team. To be sure they have to give them eleven goals. There, Sam has got the ball. Well done. Where is Mr. Lathom? He's No. 2. Why didn't Dick Sherwin see that he was in his position? There Dick comes himself. Oh, Dick missed it. Actually missed it. Anything more easy. I can't understand. I never saw him do that before. Now where is he going? Riding off as if he were looking at the landscape. Oh! There he rode directly over the ball as if he'd never had a pole stick in his hand. What is going to become of us if that is the way he is going to play?"

Down at the edge of the field, one foot on the board, old Jim Conyers stood with his hands in his coat pockets.

"I tell you it isn't as it was in our day," he was saying to his companion, whose weight classed him as a contemporary. "And the game was another thing. Every man was for himself. Some dash, some individuality. But But this team business is mere machine work. Oh, I don't say it doesn't win matches, but we played for the fun of it. Now, you might as well be in a game of checkers with a move here and a move there. The individual playing isn't anything like as good. Look there at Sherwin. Missed it! Do you think that 'Benny' Wade would have done that in ninety-two when he was playing at the top of his game? Just watch Sherwin—the best man. Hasn't made a stroke today that I've seen. And as for getting up on the ball, he might as well be looking for four-leaf clovers for all the vigor there is about it. That's not the way we used to play. Missed it once more. He couldn't hit the earth if he came up to it on a walk. I'm going back to the club house."

Dressed and ready where the ponies were being led about, Latham fairly danced up and down with agitation. He had arrived late and Brownlee had taken his place. Waiting his turn to go on, he watched the game.

"What's the matter with Sherwin?" he exclaimed. "He was bad enough before, but he's simply rotten now. A 6-year-old child on a rocking horse could do better. There, he hasn't seen the ball. Oh, he has found it, has he? Has some idea there is a ball. I'm glad of that, anyway. Get on now. Ride him off. Ride him off. Little Dodds pushed him away like an old boot. Not that Sherwin had any business there anyway. He's off side—off everything. Missed it! Well, when he has played before he used to hit it, but now——. He's worse than he's ever been. There he goes again, galloping over the field as if he were lost and was trying to find the way home." And Lathom turned away in deep disgust. He's playing polo as if he were delivering milk——"

On the following evening a despondent trio sat on the veranda of the Lindsay "cottage." Dinner was finished and the Team—minus Sherwin—had gathered to discuss their woes.

"You look like mourners," said Mrs. Lindsay arriving through the window.

"We are a committee," Willoughby announced in a desperate tone. "We are considering—can't you help——"

"What can I do?"

"Use your influence."

Mrs. Lindsay nodded as if with the best intentions she could accomplish nothing.

"You know what's the matter with Sherwin. He's in love with Miss Norris to that degree that he's not good for anything. Can't you induce her to let up?"

"I've told her," she lamented. "I have remonstrated with her. For the last three days I have watched. She has been perfectly horrid to him."

"That's it, then," said Raikes suddenly. "That's what's made him so much worse. He's doing the blighted being now."

"But if he plays badly when she's nice to him and worse when she's horrid—what can be done?"

"Love and polo don't agree," groaned Lathom.

"Love and anything don't do," added Willoughby, who was the proud possessor of a mild reputation for cynicism.

"Certainly it's very unfortunate," admitted Mrs. Lindsay.

"Why did you bring her here?" complained Raikes. "All was going so well. We were sure to win and now——"

"Just because a girl happens to appear we're lost."

"A young woman is the deuce," declared Willoughby.

"Couldn't you send her away?" suggested Raikes boldly.

"Impossible," cried Mrs. Lindsay. "Besides the match is tomorrow." Something like a groan arose from the three in response to her words.

"It's all up," announced Raikes with solemn finality.

* * *

The big flag blew out gayly from the high club house flagpole. On the striped green and white tent raised at one end of the field the smaller pennants fluttered tremendously. With the brightness and stir they seemed in some way to characterize—to sum up the scene. The last carriage and coach turned into its place. The line behind the white ribbon of board extended nearly to the end. The terraces and steps of the club house itself were crowded to overflowing. From the south goal post to the western corner where the ponies were collected was an unbroken row of spectators. The band discreetly placed at a distance broke into ragtime with a cheerful bray.

As Sherwin swung himself onto his first mount and trotted out on the field he appeared out of accord with time and place. His brow was heavy; his eyes troubled. A little further along the Eastleas were mounting—a lot of men who looked as if they were ready to "go strong," each with a string of ponies that would give every man of them the chance to do his best.

"Who wants a death's head for number four," said Raikes observing Sherwin.

"If that little girl had only seen fit to defer her visit," muttered Lathom.

With the expression of a forlorn hope the Westmeads came on the ground. No one addressed Sherwin. He spoke to no one. Grimly all approached the work before them. In the distrust and lack of fellowship occasioned by Sherwin's defection, if in nothing else, might have been found assurance of defeat. Waiting for the ball to be thrown, the Westmeads stood—a sorry, discouraged line.

"Ready," cried the Eastlea captain.

Sherwin merely nodded.

Down between the row of waiting ponies rolled the glittering white object. Straight toward Sherwin at the end of the line it came.

A groan of dismay went up from the Westmead ranks. Sherwin had dropped his stick. With a rush the Eastlea's number four was up, was on the ball, had driven it on—away. Past Sherwin the hurrying riders flew, leaving him alone ignominiously to dismount. At that instant a voice sounded clearly through the comparative stillness.

"Mr. Sherwin! Mr. Sherwin!"

He looked up. Not a hundred yards away Winifred Norris sat on the box of the Lindsay victoria from which the horses had been taken. At that instant the ball was driven out of bounds on the other side of the field.

"Time," called the referee.

With a skip Sherwin's pony was over the board. In an instant he stood with the girl looking down on him.

"Oh," she cried as she leaned forward with her hands clasped. "I can't bear it. On your account—on my account, on account of the team. I can't have it."

Sherwin looked up in her eyes questioningly.

"I did not mean to be horrid to you. They said they thought that I was making you play badly, and I wanted you to play well. I believe that if I did as I did—"

He brought his pony closer to the wheel.

"And I can't bear to have you do badly now—for my sake," she said.

"You care?" he asked.

"I should think I did," she declared. "More than anything else—because—"

"Why?" he asked, bending forward.

"Oh, it is awful for me to say. It is almost like proposing to you. Because—because I care about you."

"You mean that?" he said, with a quick upward glance.

"More than I ever meant anything. More than I ever shall mean anything,' she replied in a low tone.

From the other side of the ground came frantic calls.

"Sherwin! Sherwin!"

"You know," he answered, "I love you."

"Yes, yes!" she cried. "I know. I know. That keeps what I said from being so awful—and I should have let you know some time. And why not now? For it's more important than anything else. Only the game. You must not let they say I have spoiled everything. Now that you know—"

"Sherwin!" cried Conyers, bustling up. "Are you mad? Don't you see that they are waiting for you? Wake up. You'll lose everything."

"Not when I've won," he answered.

Conyers stared at him as if he doubted his sanity.

"Oh, you don't believe me," Sherwin laughed. "Well, you just don't know. Only look out."

He held up his hand toward Winifred, who took it.

"For our sake," she said softly.

Two hours later as the bell clanged a hurried cheer went up and the crowd broke over the boards. Across by the club house the band broke frantically into "There'll Be a Hot Time in the Old Town Tonight." All knew the score before the members appeared. The Westmeads were the winners by a goal. With breathless attention the club had followed the game—elated by every advantage, cast down by every reverse. As Sherwin made the last winning stroke, a long oblique drive of perfect accuracy from a point at least a hundred yards from the posts in the last minute of play, they had known the results. All crowded about his pony.

"The game of your life," my boy," exclaimed old Conyers exultingly.

"Never saw anything like it," said Raikes, trotting up. "You played big."

"All your doing," assured Lathom.

Then after they had given the cheers for the other side and been cheered in return, Willoughby stood up in his stirrups.

"And now three cheers for Sherwin."

In the ringing shouts the Eastleas joined admiringly.

Still later Sherwin stood beside Winifred on the club steps.

"They want to speak to you," said Raikes, suddenly coming up.

"Who?"

"The team."

"Why?"

"They want to apologize."

"Bring them here," Sherwin directed, after an inquiring look at the girl.

A sign from Raikes called up Lathom, Willoughby and Brownlee, who had held back.

"We wish," continued Raikes, "to tell you formally that you won the game."

"No, I did not," Sherwin replied.

No one spoke.

"That was some one else," he went on. "If I did anything it was through the influence that has strengthened many a man's arm. That has led many a man to strike for his love and a lady. I have Miss Norris' permission to announce—"

As one man the team endeavored to shake his hand.

"So you see that a girl is not necessarily the deuce," said Winifred.

"You heard," exclaimed Willoughby.

"Mrs. Lindsay told me."

"But certainly you know a man in love—" persisted Willoughby.

"No, it is only the uncertainty that is the trouble. Otherwise," said Sherwin with confidence, "it's all right in polo or anything."

"We believe it!" cried Lathom, Raikes and Brownlee, with Willoughby as a faint and reluctant echo.

"Thank you," said Winifred, casting down her eyes.

And the cup which the team presented to the Sherwins as a wedding gift bore the record of the Westmead-Eastlea match, even as it is inscribed on the cup standing over the mantel of the club smoking room.

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MR. BARNES, AMERICAN.

Continued from Page 12.

gles," says Enid, coldly, though her heart is beating wildly.

"Oh, but she won't stick to Mr. Ruggles. So I thought I'd just give you a hint, so that if she cuts in after you're married you'll know how to fix her. Of course, this evening you are blocked."

"Blocked, this evening?"

"I want to tell you something that happened!"

"Don't dare to."

"But I will, for your sake. A note came to Barnsey from her."

"A note from that infamous creature? Impossible!"

"Impossible? I slipped it into Burton's hand just before he went in to dinner, and he slipped it into his pocket. I saw the address; it was in her handwriting."

"Liar, how do you know La Blackwood's handwriting?" cries the tortured one.

"Blackie's autograph facsimile was published in an advertisement of Lily's Soap, in the London Gossip last month. 'I recommend your soap for its unblemished purity,' she wrote. Thunder, how I laughed at that ad. But you want to take this seriously, you do, Enid, and not giggle hysterically, as you are now. Ouch! Oh, good Lordy, be careful, you are pinching my arm!"

"Very well, I will," says the young lady, whose face has become that of a marble statue, lighted by two burning tortured eyes. "Now to bed, you meddler, and not a word of this to anyone on earth, or you know what I know and will tell your mother."

"Jingo, not about—"

"Yes!"

And Maud retires subdued, but she leaves convulsed features, clenched hands and a dizzy brain behind her. Miss Austruther sighs: "Oh, if he dares to see her!" then murmurs, "No, no, impossible! He's gone to get the minister for tomorrow—to wed me."

Yet several burning tears run down the fair cheeks of the coming bride as she tosses herself into bed and cannot go to sleep.

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