

WILDFIRE



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PROLOGUE OF THE STORY.

John Barrington, a stockbroker of regular habits, dies. His widow finds included in her meager heritage a racing stable secretly operated by her husband during life under the name "John Duffy." "Widow" Barrington, after conferring with Mat Donovan, the trainer, decides to secretly continue ownership of the stable under the old name and live near the track. Her sister, Myrtle, and her fiancé, Ralph Woodhurst, whose father is opposed to the race track, are interrupted in their lovemaking by Janet Stirling, who annoys Ralph by referring to him as a model young man. Donovan arrives in quest of Mrs. Barrington and Bertie Ainsworth tries unsuccessfully to humiliate him. Mrs. Barrington returns from an auto ride with Mr. Sanderson. John Garrison, a rich miner, a friend of two weeks' standing, proposes to the widow. Wildfire's chances of winning the Ocean stakes on the morrow are being discussed when Dr. Woodhurst, the race track reformer, joins them unexpectedly, and Mrs. Barrington has an uncomfortable time getting rid of him. Chappy Raster, the egotistic jockey who is to ride Wildfire, calls on Mrs. Barrington to see "the owner of the John Duffy stable." John Duffy, a bookmaker, who is believed by most people to be the owner of the stable, has won the enmity of Garrison, who threatens to "break" him. Ralph secretly stakes a large sum on Wildfire and while at the track is met by Myrtle. Mrs. Barrington puts in an appearance after they leave.

At the Duffy Stable.

HASTILY slipping on his coat Donovan replied: "Yes, Mrs. Barrington, and you needn't worry—everything is aces." "I know—I know. I have absolute confidence in Wildfire and you, but—well, I simply can't help being anxious. So much depends on this race that I have—I shouldn't come here today—I know it!"

"Perhaps you're right, ma'am," assented Donovan. "But I do so want to put my arms around Wildfire's neck!" she glanced toward the stable—"and give her one big hug. I want to whisper in her ear how much this race means to me! Oh, Donovan, I hate to think of letting her go—even if we do get a big price. Just think, Donovan, if somebody bought her who wouldn't be kind to her!"

He smiled at her anxiety about the mare's future and allayed her fears with the assurance: "Say, don't worry about Wildfire, Mrs. Barrington. Did you ever see anybody that didn't have loving words for their bank account? Did you ever know anybody that threw ice at their meal tickets? It don't make no difference who gets Wildfire if you want to sell her—she'll always be treated right, because she's the goods."

"She is the goods, Donovan, and no mistake. But how about Raster? Do you think he will ride a good race?" "Oh, he's all right. He's kind of far-headed, but that don't count against him. He's on the level, all right."

"Oh! If I could only stay and see the race!" sighed the widow. "Why don't you?" "Oh! I couldn't. I couldn't. I'd get so excited I'd scream. I know I would. Somebody would be sure to notice it and—no, it's impossible."

"You could stop here and nobody would see you—you can watch them coming down and going into the stretch from that window there."

Donovan dangled the temptation before her. She half arose from the chair to go to the window, but sank back with the renunciation, "No, no! I couldn't."

"Go on! Do it, Mrs. Barrington," pleaded Donovan. "You ain't takin' no chances—nobody is going to be here except Bud—and you've seen him often enough."

Mrs. Barrington laughed nervously. "I'm half-tempted."

"Why, of course you will," he heartily replied.

"Oh, but I must go home first," Mrs. Barrington explained. "Dr. Woodhurst telephoned me this morning he wanted to see me on a very important matter. I'll leave word there that I've gone out driving."

"And when you come back, come in through the side entrance here," said Donovan, pointing to a side door. "You can go home that way so as to get the lay of the land. Just follow that path on the left there, and it will take you up to the main road."

"That's splendid, Donovan," cried Mrs. Barrington. "Fine. Now just wait a minute and I'll have Wildfire taken out of the stall so you can see her." Donovan entered the stable, leaving her alone in the quarters.

"I'll do it! I'll come back!" cried Mrs. Barrington, with her hand on the knob of the door leading to the pathway. Before she could open it she was startled by a voice saying, "How do you do, Mrs. Barrington?"

Mrs. Barrington turned to face John Garrison, who stood in the doorway, smiling, with his hat in his hand. She greeted him nervously. "Oh! How do you do, Mr. Garrison?"

"I saw you come in and I've been waiting outside for you to come out." He entered, closing the door.

"Really?" was all Mrs. Barrington could reply.

"I wouldn't take my life in my hands for any other woman, Mrs. Barrington," laughingly continued Garrison. "Indeed! And what deadly risk do you run by coming in here?" she asked in mock earnestness.

"This is my rival's establishment," Garrison glanced about him.

"Your rival?" She did not grasp his meaning.

"Yes, Duffy," he explained.

"Oh!" The exclamation was almost a question.

"Yes, and I am going out to beat him today. I bought Jackdaw for that special purpose. John Duffy's poor old Wildfire will be a fallen idol before sundown."

"That's too bad."

"Too bad?" he faltered.

"I am sorry for Mr. Duffy. Aren't you rather inclined to be vindictive, Mr. Garrison?" she questioned, speaking lightly.

"Vindictive! No. Duffy invited this fight, and I am going to give him all he wants. I am going to try to beat every horse of his that goes to the post."

"Again I wish to remark, poor Mr. Duffy!"

Garrison found this line of talk very hard to sustain. Before he could change the subject Mr. Sanderson entered rather sheepishly.

"How do you do, Mrs. Barrington? How do you do, Garrison?" Both acknowledged his greeting. "I saw you come in—I have been waiting outside for you to come out," he rattled on.

"Really?" interjected Mrs. Barrington.

"And while waiting outside for you to come out I saw Garrison come in, so I concluded that where Garrison could go I could go."

Mrs. Barrington glanced at the discomfited Garrison and observed, "That, too, sounds logical."

"I called at your house and they told me you had gone for a walk in the direction of the race track," Sanderson explained. "My new French machine arrived yesterday, and it's a corker. I can't take it out officially until you honor me with your presence, you know. What do you say, Mrs. Barrington? It's a delightful afternoon for a spin."

"Nonsense! Mrs. Barrington is going to stay and see the races. Aren't you?" interrupted Garrison.

"Well," mused the widow. The two men stood side by side before her like schoolboys awaiting an answer for a holiday plea.

"Well," they both repeated.

Mrs. Barrington laughed. "With the prospect of so much delight before me how am I going to decide?"

"It's the simplest thing in the world. I was here first, and I claim my rights in the premises," begged Garrison.

"Yes, but, Mrs. Barrington, you must remember you promised to help me christen the new machine, and this is the day of the christening," urged Sanderson.

Mrs. Barrington cut the Gordian knot with the explanation: "I am afraid, gentlemen, I must doom myself to a bitter disappointment in declining both invitations and plead the excuse of a previous engagement. I promised to get Dr. Woodhurst some information for his new pamphlet. So I am interviewing Mr. Donovan."

"Doubtless you don't care for the presence of a third and fourth party while Mr. Duffy's trainer is imparting his valuable information," suggested Garrison.

"You seem to be endowed with almost superhuman perspicacity! Good day, gentlemen!"

Crooked Work.

THE hour for the big race was fast approaching. Donovan had hurried Chappy into his racing togs that Mrs. Barrington might have a final word with him.

Mrs. Barrington paused thoughtfully before she spoke. Then she said:

"Well, if I owned Wildfire, I should say: 'Don't send her out in front. Let some one else make the pace. It will be Jackdaw most likely, and he'll try to run Wildfire off her feet. But don't let that worry you. Remember that the quicker he gets away in the first quarter the quicker he'll come back to you when he tires in the last quarter.'"

"Yes, ma'am," interrupted Chappy.

She motioned him to be silent and continued, "Ride along comfortably in about fifth position till just before you reach the stretch there."

Mrs. Barrington pointed out of the window to the spot where Ralph had said so many races were won or lost. Her voice trembled with enthusiasm. She was riding the race in imagination.

"Then let her down. Go after them and get them!" she cried. "You can depend on Wildfire. She'll give you



"Just talk to her, coax her, plead with her."

the last drop of blood in her veins and the last ounce of strength in her body, for her heart is right and she'll outgame them all. Remember this: No matter what happens, Wildfire won't quit. If you think she's tiring talk to her, but don't go to the whip nor use the spur. She wouldn't know what it meant, for she's never felt either. Just talk to her, coax her, plead with her as a man talks to and coaxes and pleads with the woman he loves. Whisper to her: 'Go on, Wildfire, old girl; go on. You can do it. You can do it! Everybody in the stable knows you can and wants you to do it! Faster, girl! Faster! That's it. You're gaining! You're gaining! You can win, so go on for the sake of those who love you, girl—go on, go on! Talk to her like that and she'll go till she drops, for she's a mare and she's game.'"

"That goes for me too. Understand?" growled Donovan.

Chappy could only gasp, "Yes, sir."

"That's all," snapped Donovan.

"Yes, Mr. Donovan, I understand. Where's the bridle?" the boy asked.

Donovan handed it to him, and the boy left the quarters to go to Wildfire's stall. The widow had followed him to the door to give him one more word of encouragement. With a cry of "It's all right, Donovan!" and a jolly laugh, she waved her handkerchief in the air and almost skipped like a girl as she turned to face—Dr. Woodhurst, who was gazing about him in bewilderment at Donovan's trappings and household gods. That worthy had sought to escape, and was now trying to hide himself behind the barriers of his road horse.

Mrs. Barrington gave a timid little shriek at the sight of the doctor. Struggling to regain her composure, she answered his surprised "So you are here?" with "Of course I am. Where did you think I was?"

"Well, well, well! How do you do, Mrs. Barrington?" The doctor shook her hand effusively. "I just met Mr. Garrison and Mr. Sanderson and they told me you were here waiting for me."

"Of course, I'm very glad to help you," she cried in confusion.

"You see, I want to finish that pamphlet and get it printed at the earliest moment, so I concluded I had better come to the race track myself this afternoon and gather up all the information I possibly could."

A bugle call roused Donovan to action. To the widow he cried: "Get the old boy away. Things are going to be busy around here in a minute or two."

Quickly grasping his idea, she softly said, "Very well," and then, in louder tones, she addressed the doctor. "Oh, doctor, she took his arm as he answered 'Yes, Mrs. Barrington.'"

"Through Mr. Donovan," she wheedled, "I have made an appointment with Mr. Duffy, the owner of this stable, from whom I feel sure I can get all the information you require. If you will be good enough to walk with me as far as the road we'll be able to talk it over."

They went out. The ringing of a bell drove all thoughts of the doctor from Donovan's mind.

"The post call," he cried. "Bud!" "Here's I'm," Bud from upstairs.

"Keep your eye on things now. If anybody comes in here for me tell 'em I'll see 'em later, and don't you leave here for anything or anybody. Don't ever leave this place with nobody to look after it."

"I won't, Mr. Donovan," Bud solemnly promised.

Bud started for the stairs to make the trainer's bed. Chappy entered to get his saddle and catch one more glimpse of himself in a mirror.

The beat of horses' hoofs as they swept into the stretch and the cries of the crowd attracted the jockey's attention and he walked over to the window, carrying the saddle on his arm. After one glance he started for the stable. Just then John Duffy entered and called him. "Come here! You know who I am, don't you?" he asked, speaking in a loud tone, glancing cautiously about the room.

"Yes, sir, you is Mr. Duffy," answered Chappy.

The bookmaker laid his hand on the jockey's shoulder, drawing him closer to his side.

"Now, then, is Mr. Donovan about?" "No, sir, he is just gone out."

"What orders have you about Wildfire?"

"I see to wait till we comes into the stretch, den I's to send her out to win."

"Whose orders are those?" "Mr. Donovan's."

"Well, I'm going to change 'em," said Duffy.

"Change Mr. Donovan's orders?" the boy gasped.

"Yes. Now you listen to what John Duffy has to say. I can make a killing today if you do as I tell you. Now listen to me! Come here!" ordered Duffy, almost dragging the boy to the window. "See this window. This window is in full view as you come into the turn of the stretch. Now what I want you to do is to ride along the outside of the bunch until you come in view of this window—you'll see me standing there. Now, then, if you see a white handkerchief waving you cut loose and win; if you don't see a white handkerchief waving you lose. That's all there is to it."

"I couldn't lose den, Mr. Duffy," cried Chappy, in fear and trembling.

"De judges and everybody'd be watchin' me den; besides, I wouldn't know how to do it; ain't never pulled no horse in my life."

"You don't need to know."

"Den what does yer want me to do?" asked Chappy in his perturbation.

"There's lots of ways of losing a race," explained Duffy, "without pulling a horse, and with Wildfire, it's easier than sliding down a toboggan. Listen. When you go past that window if there's no white handkerchief, then give her one dig with the spurs, just one, and it'll be all over."

"Use the spurs?" asked the bewildered boy.

"Just once," assured Duffy.

"I—I don't think that!"

Duffy interrupted him with the question. "Can anybody see you do it?"

"No, sir," assented Chappy.

"If there is a white handkerchief," Chappy did not let him finish. "I wins. I understand all about that, but where do you come in? If Wildfire don't win Jackdaw will, and den—"

"That's it exactly," answered Duffy. "Either Wildfire or Jackdaw wins, and it's for me to say which one. The odds when I go from here to the betting ring will decide that."

"But isn't Wildfire the favorite?"

"Yes. Wildfire's place is shorter than Jackdaw's now, but I hear that there's some big commissions to go in on Jackdaw which will send his price down and Wildfire's up. If that's right I bet on Wildfire and Wildfire wins. If

not I bet on Jackdaw and Jackdaw wins. I place my money where I can get the best odds, and you do the rest."

"But dis Mr. Garrison, who bought Jackdaw?"

"Don't bother about him. He is in on it," cried Duffy. "So's the jockey who is up on Jackdaw."

The bookmaker did not care how many more persons he would implicate in the throwing of the race. Anyhow he wished to poison the mind of every person he could reach against his old enemy, Garrison.

"Mr. Garrison, he knows about it?" Chappy asked, to make certain.

"Sure he does; he's no fool. He

bought the horse so as to make this killing. You've got your instructions—follow them, for if you don't"—A threatening note crept into Duffy's voice.

"Yes, sir," said Chappy. "Then go and do as you've been told."

"Der white handkerchief."

"You win, understand?" asked Duffy. Chappy paused at the door and replied fervently. "Yes, sir, and I hope I sees it."

Duffy waited until he was out of earshot, then, drawing his handkerchief from his pocket, he wiped the nervous perspiration from his forehead. He chuckled and said: "Easy, easy; dead easy." He was still laughing when he left the trainer's quarters for the betting ring.

The Defaulter.

THE slam of the door informed Bud of his departure. In his haste and excitement the boy slid down a pole leading from the bedroom to the trainer's quarters. Tears were streaming down his dirt-smudged face as he cried:

"It's a frame up! It's a frame up!"

"What's wrong, Bud? What is the matter?" asked Mrs. Barrington, who entered the room at that moment, having got rid of the doctor.

"Matter! Why, it's a couple of crooks. Dat's what's de matter. They've got it all framed up for Wildfire to lose."

"For Wildfire to lose! What do you mean?" asked the stunned widow.

"John Duffy—that's what I mean. He come in here and he gets next to de smoke jockey and tells him he'll be in on de play," explained Bud, talking in his own vernacular.

Bud sank into the rocker and covered his face with his hands. Mrs. Barrington knelt beside him.

"Listen, Bud," she said. "I'm beginning to realize what's been going on—and you must tell me all about it quickly—quickly—for everything I have in the world depends on this race."

"Duffy comes on de main deck here," cried the excited boy, "while I'm up aloft. He don't know dat—so he frames it all up with de dinge, and de dinge hicks. Duffy and Garrison are working together, and—"

"Garrison?"

"Sure—Garrison."

"I don't believe it," she cried in dismay.

"Well, Duffy comes in an' he sees de coon." He ran to the window, beckoning her to follow him. When she had joined him he continued. "He sees der coon, an' he says to him: 'See dat window? When you's comin' to turn into der stretch, if dere's a white handkerchief waving dere you wins—if der ain't no handkerchief you loses and Jackdaw wins, and dat's all dere is to it.'"

"A white handkerchief and Wildfire wins!" she repeated in her distress.

Mrs. Barrington understood. Duffy and Garrison—a queer combination, she thought. But they had met years ago. Were Garrison's pretensions all fraudulent, just to win her confidence? Were all her hopes to be shattered in one blow and Garrison, he of all men, to deliver it? She thought quickly; already a plan was forming in her mind.

"If I only could find Donovan!" wailed Bud.

"Try, Bud, try! I'll stay here till you come back," she begged, pushing him to the door.

Helpless, almost hopeless, she paced to and fro, awaiting Donovan's return. From the cheers and handclapping she knew the field was parading. She started for the window, when the door burst open and Ralph rushed in.

"Donovan!" he called, his voice trembling with excitement.

"Ralph! What are you doing here?" "Nothing—nothing." Ralph was almost breathless.

"And why are you so pale? Ralph, what's the matter?" she demanded.

"It's—it's"—The boy could not confess to her.

"You've been betting!" she cried.

Ralph nodded dumbly.

"And have lost?"

His chin sank on his breast. "Two thousand dollars," he faltered.

"To whom?"

"Duffy," he whispered.

"Duffy? I'll pay him."

Ralph shook his head in agony.

"It's paid already," was his reply in a weak voice.

"How?" she questioned.

"With the money—with the money"—Ralph began, with a sob.

"With the money your father gave you this morning?" she asked.

The dropping of his head confirmed her surmise.

"He must never know. Some way or other I'll get it for you," she assured him confidently.

Mrs. Barrington's determination to pay the money might be of little help to him, for he had to tell her:

"That isn't all."

"Isn't all?" Her heart sank at the thought of the boy sinking deeper into the mire of the track.

"No. Hoping to win it back, I've plunged on Wildfire with the rest," he confessed.

"What?" she cried in amazement at the further revelations.

"Yes. And there's a change in the betting. That's what I came to see Donovan about. Do you see what this means to me? If Wildfire loses father will cast me off like the thief I am and I shall lose everything—everything—even Myrtle! What a fool I've been!" he wailed, covering his face with his hands.

Gently Mrs. Barrington laid her hands on his shoulders. The fault was not all his. One of the evils of the business in which she made her livelihood was coming to her own door. She had never realized it fully before. Vaguely she had heard of such cases, but here it had come to her. The boy

who was to marry her sister, Ralph, whom she loved like a brother, was a defaulter, and her own stable had led him on. Deeply Duffy and Garrison would pay for the throwing of the race.

"I'm not going to lecture you," she softly said. "I think you've learned your lesson. And for your sake, for Myrtle's and for mine if Wildfire can win this race she shall do it."

"But the horses are at the post. And the betting!"—faltered Ralph.

"I understand about that. Once more—it's Duffy," she spoke in full confidence.

"Duffy," exclaimed Ralph. Her mind was made up, her plan was made.

"I expect he'll be here in a few minutes. When he comes, introduce him to me," she commanded.

"Introduce him?" asked Ralph in consternation.

"Yes, and then leave us," Mrs. Barrington firmly insisted.

"Leave you here alone with that beast?" His tone was full of contempt.

Proudly and confidently she replied: "Exactly! Leave me here alone with that beast. Wildfire has got to win that race."

In the grand stand the band had ceased playing. Stragglers were hurrying to get points of vantage from which to see the race. The bookmakers had ceased taking bets and the clerks were climbing onto their stools.

Duffy had wagered his last penny on Jackdaw and hurried back to the stable to be at the window from which Chappy was to receive a signal if he was to win or was to throw the race if no white handkerchief was to be seen.

Mrs. Barrington heard Duffy's thumb pressing the latch, and with a cry of warning darted into the passageway leading to the stable.

Duffy entered hurriedly, going at once to the window. He was surprised at seeing young Woodhurst in the trainer's quarters.

"Hello, Woodhurst. I"—he began. On second thought he decided to make no explanation to the boy. All he vouchsafed him was a sullen, "You at the track again?"

Ralph made no answer, but watched Mrs. Barrington come out of the stable and take a position beside the desk. Duffy kept his back to her. He was watching the start.

She greeted him very sweetly, "Mr. Duffy!" Her salutation had in it a note of inquiry.

Turning swiftly the bookmaker was astonished and delighted to see her standing near him, with her face lighted up as if in pleased recognition.

"When I met you this morning I did not know that you were the real Mr. Duffy. That makes a difference, doesn't it?" she asked in her most charming manner.

"Why, of course it does," Duffy assented, striving to appear at ease, inwardly cursing himself at his lack of poise when in the presence of a lady.

"I've long wanted to meet you, Mr. Duffy," she continued.

"Same here," was his reply.

"The desire being mutual, Ralph, suppose you introduce the gentleman?" She signaled to Ralph with her eyes to do as she told him. The boy could not understand what she was driving at and hesitated to obey.

"Ralph, please," she begged.

Sullenly he went through the formality of an introduction.

Mrs. Barrington bewildered the bookmaker with the smile she gave him as she murmured, "I'm glad to meet you, Mr. Duffy."

"Same here," he replied, at the same time glancing out of the window, but he wished that the time had been more opportune for him. He wanted to make a good impression, but with the thoughts of the race constantly intruding he felt that he was making a hopeless failure of his case.

The roar of the crowd increased. The rumble of "They're off!" made Mrs. Barrington turn pale. A cry of disappointment gave her new hope in the delay. Duffy had cried "They're off!" as he saw the barrier go up, but as the roar died out, the jockeys pulling up, Duffy from the window told her "They're still at the post. That crazy horse Campbell is delaying them."

In a tone full of meaning, telling Ralph that his answer must be in the affirmative, Mrs. Barrington said to him, "Don't you want to see the race?"

Still the boy hesitated. In pantomime she ordered him to leave the stable. Catching her meaning fully, he replied, "Oh, yes; I certainly do. Excuse me, won't you?"

Duffy, from his stand at the window, saw the door close with satisfaction. At last he was alone with Mrs. Barrington and could talk with her as he had long desired. His ideals of womanhood were not high. He judged all from the few he knew.

Meantime Mrs. Barrington had been trying to catch a glimpse of what was happening on the track.

Waiting until Ralph was well out of the way, Duffy said: "There's a funny thing about our meeting like this. That boy has refused to introduce me not once, but twenty times, but he finally had to do it."

"It just had to be, I imagine, and I'm glad of it," cooed the widow, leading him on to his destruction.

"If it ain't it won't be my fault," smiled the infatuated Duffy.

"Nor mine," she agreed.

"Do you know, I've always felt that we'd get along very well together if we ever met. You're just my style. I'll tell you that, Mrs. Barrington."

She shuddered at the hideous familiarity of the man and his grossness in looks and language.