

Only a Jockey

Banjo Paterson

‘Richard Bennison, a jockey, aged 14, while riding William Tell in his training, was thrown and killed. The horse is luckily uninjured.’

— Melbourne Wire.

Out in the grey cheerless chill of the morning light,
Out on the track where the night shades still lurk;
Ere the first gleam of the sungod’s returning light,
Round come the race-horses early at work.

Reefing and pulling and racing so readily,
Close sit the jockey-boys holding them hard,
‘Steady the stallion there — canter him steadily,
‘Don’t let him gallop so much as a yard.’

Fiercely he fights while the others run wide of him,
Reefs at the bit that would hold him in thrall,
Plunges and bucks till the boy that’s astride of him
Goes to the ground with a terrible fall.

‘Stop him there! Block him there! Drive him in carefully,

Lead him about till he’s quiet and cool.

‘Sound as a bell! though he’s blown himself fearfully,

‘Now let us pick up this poor little fool.

‘Stunned? Oh, by Jove, I’m afraid it’s a case with him;

‘Ride for the doctor! keep bathing his head!

‘Send for a cart to go down to our place with him’—

No use! One long sigh and the little chap’s dead.

Only a jockey-boy, foul-mouthed and bad you see,

Ignorant, heathenish, gone to his rest.

Parson or Presbyter, Pharisee, Sadducee,

What did you do for him? — bad was the best.

Negroes and foreigners, all have a claim on you;

Yearly you send your well-advertised hoard,

But the poor jockey-boy — shame on you, shame on you,

‘Feed ye, my little ones’ — what said the Lord?

Him ye held less than the outer barbarian,

Left him to die in his ignorant sin;

Have you no principles, humanitarian?

Have you no precept — ‘go gather them in?’

Knew he God’s name? In his brutal profanity,

That name was an oath — out of many but one—

What did he get from our famed Christianity?

Where has his soul — if he had any — gone?

Fourteen years old, and what was he taught of it?

What did he know of God’s infinite grace?

Draw the dark curtain of shame o’er the thought of it,

Draw the shroud over the jockey-boy’s face.

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