

"What sort of state is he in at present?" inquired the Baronet. "I mean, could he ride now?"

"Yes," rejoined Slade, "that is the provoking thing about it: He could; but you don't suppose he'll stay where he is. Just insinuate to him that he had better touch nothing till the race is over, and he'd ring for more drink that minute. Leave him to himself—"

"And he'll drink all the same," chimed in the Baronet. "Yes; I know my friend Bill, and when he is fairly off on the booze it would take chain-cables to hold him. Have you ventured to suggest that Tom Shaddock should ride in his place?"

"Not yet; I have succeeded in managing the whole thing capitally. Abrahams, who owns Hobbyhorse, is quite prepared to let us have Shaddock, providing we give him a thousand if Belisarius wins; and Shaddock will be quite content to, in like manner, stand five hundred to nothing."

"Shaddock is as good as most of them," replied the Baronet. "Can't Bill be brought to accede to that arrangement?"

"We shall have to try," said Slade, "but in his present temper I am afraid not; besides, you know what he is. He looks upon himself as seven pounds better than any one else. They are all given to it; but there never was a jockey more conceited about his own riding than Bill Smith."

"Then," said Sir Ronald, "there is only one thing to be done; we shall have to tie him up to the bedpost, and lock him in his room."

Norman Slade gave vent to a grim laugh as he replied, "I wish, we could; and, by Jove, we would, if he was only trainer and jockey, but, unfortunately, you see, he owns the horse, and there's no gainsaying that he has a right to do what he likes with his own. He's just in that beastly temper in which he would say that he only kept racers for the sport of the thing; and that if he couldn't ride them himself he didn't care to starve them. If his colt got beaten there'd be a pretty row. He and all the public with him would say that it was all our fault—that if Bill himself had been up he would have won easily."

"You're right," said Sir Ronald, moodily, "I suppose there would be a royal row; and yet, hang it, I've half a mind to chance it—it's not often one has the chance of such a *coupe* as this."

"Yes," retorted Slade, "and I'm sorry for the fool himself; he stands to win a rare nice stake, and he wants it; he is never likely to get much more riding. He is not likely, in his small way, to pick up such another colt as Belisarius. To fool away this chance will be the throwing away, probably, of his last."

"Well, we've got the morning before us," said Sir Ronald; "and I can only hope that he will listen to reason. In the mean time, I shall stroll into the town and see what's doing. It was an awful bit of bad luck that I couldn't take your place at Bellaton Moor."

Left to himself, Norman Slade pondered deeply over the situation. He could see no way out of it. He knew his man far too well to suppose Bill Smith's sobriety would improve as the day wore on, nor was there the slightest chance of his getting quite *hors de combat*. He never did that; then again, the combined vanity and obstinacy of the jockey made it most improbable that he would ever consent to Tom Shaddock's taking his place. Norman had considered himself extremely fortunate in having concluded that negotiation successfully. Shaddock was a fine horseman, and quite capable of doing the colt every justice; but, in his exultation, he had quite overlooked the vanity of human nature, and the infirmity of human temper. The jockey had not as yet left his room, and there was no use as yet, as Slade well knew, in arguing further with him. He strolled out into the town, and again saw Shaddock and Shaddock's employer. Both expressed themselves perfectly willing to stand to the agreement to the very last available moment.

"Let me know half-an-hour before the numbers go up, and it will be all right, sir. My horse won't start, and Tom here is very much at your service."

By this time the secret of Bill Smith's indiscretion had begun to leak out amongst those sporting men who had elected Epsom for their head quarters. That the delinquent was a small, spare, wiry man, as they well knew, made it probable that he would be able to ride the weight. But a jockey who got up to ride in a big race rather the worse for drink was no more to be relied on than in any other calling in life; and there was a manifest tendency to bet against Belisarius in consequence. Slade strolled up to the course; and, though the day was still young, the early contingent from London was already sprinkled about the betting-lawn. A very enjoyable time this: you have a chance of seeing old friends, of hearing the latest movements in the betting-market. Later on the crowd thickens, and the coming across any one becomes a mere toss-up. If it is anybody you particularly want to see, the chances against that meeting taking place seem incalculably multiplied. In that stroll Norman encountered his nephew; and to Bertie's inquiry as to whether he fancied Belisarius, replied curtly, "No; the horse is all right, but the man's all wrong. Hedge, my boy, especially if you stand to lose anything to make you feel uncomfortable;" and then Norman jumped into his fly and drove back again to Epsom, to look after the recreant jockey.

Bill Smith was having a nondescript meal, which consisted of a sandwich and a tankard of bitter beer, and was surrounded by three or four blatant flatterers, who had apparently breakfasted more largely in a similar fashion.

"That's what I say, Mr. Smith," exclaimed one of these worthies, "when you come across a good horse, with a good man on the top of him—back him. That's where it is, I say: here's the best colt in England, and the best man in England a-goin' to ride him; it's good enough to go your shirt on—that's what it is; and I've gone it."

It was possible that he had; at all events there was not much appearance of his having it on.

(To be continued.)

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