

SADDLE AND SABRE.

(Continued).

Charlie's soldiering at home had been of the sunniest description. Quartered in one of the pleasantest cities in England, with excellent hunting close by, and the metropolis within easy distance, his experiences had been very different to the monotonous life he was now living; not that he cared about the hard work, but there was a want of excitement about it all that he felt so terribly.

"Never mind, young 'un," said Hobson, when his subaltern indulged in a hearty growl at the dullness of their present existence, "it won't last for ever; these fellows are either getting used up or dispersed, though our detachment has never had the good fortune to come up with them; still, you know, we hunt them into other people's hands, and if you have any luck you will throw in for a very pretty scrimmage yet before it is all over. From what my scouts tell me, we have got a stag roval in front of us—a fellow who was a man of mark in the Mutiny times—one of Tantia Topce's ablest lieutenants, and what is more, he is at the head of a pretty strong band. Now, that fellow don't want to fight, but you may depend upon it that whoever does come up with him will find him a stiff nut to crack."

"By Jove, this is getting rather exciting," said the other; "of course we shall beat him."

"Oh yes," rejoined Hobson, "we always do, odds or no odds; all I mean is it won't be a walk over."

"So much the better," rejoined Charlie, who, like all young soldiers, was just a little bloodthirsty; "I am keen to see something of fighting in earnest."

"Well, if we chance to come up with Shere Ali he is safe to indulge you; he is fighting with a rope round his neck, for, though his sins of the Mutiny time might be condoned, yet he has been guilty of too many outrages in the dacoit way, since, to hope for pardon."

They rode on now for some time in silence, each immersed in his own thoughts; Hobson gravely considering how he is to get the best of this ubiquitous robber, Shere Ali, upon whose trail you had no sooner got than he speedily vanished, to be heard of only again in some other part of the district. Government had decreed that this man should be stamped out like any other vermin, and the ex-soubahdar most richly deserved it. Since he had proved false to his salt, he had shown all that tiger ferocity characteristic of the Asiatic when he gets the upper hand. He had been one of the most ruthless lieutenants of Tantia Topce, and since he had become a leader of dacoits had distinguished himself by the most unrelenting hostility to the Feringhee; such Englishmen, and it was whispered even Englishwomen, who had the misfortune to fall into his hands, had met with scant mercy. This man's hands, it was known, were as deeply imbued in blood as Nana Sahib's, or any of the other savage chiefs who sprang to the front at the time of the great Mutiny. He was quite aware that there was small hope for him should he fall into the hands of the English, and had vowed to wage a war of implacable hostility against the white men.

Charlie's thoughts, on the contrary, reverted to the old country, and the life he had left behind him;—what a fool he had been! What a pleasant career was opened before him, but for those miserable gambling debts of his old Cambridge days. He had not heard so often from home as he had expected; and, strangest thing of all, Lettie had never said a word of her approaching marriage. But he had also heard from Mrs. Kynaston, and that lady, though alluding to it somewhat vaguely, quite conveyed the idea that the engagement still existed; and Charlie—who, bear in mind, was wholly ignorant of the seamy side of Ralph Furzedon's life—saw no reason why, if Lettie fancied him, it should not be. From Bertie Slade he had also heard but briefly, though satisfactorily: "In the end, Charlie," said Bertie; "your affairs, I have no doubt, will be thoroughly arranged; but your father places implicit reliance on my uncle Bob. Now the Major, you know, is a bit of a martinet, and contends that a decent dose of purgatory should precede the killing of the fatted calf for the prodigal: 'There is nothing like giving these young sinners a tolerable spell of discomfort before you re-establish them; leave the boy out there for a bit, Mr. Devereux, to enjoy the sport of dacoit-hunting, out of which there is not a laurel to be gathered, but which involves plenty of hard knocks. Besides it will make it all the easier to arrange matters with Jordan & Co. If they think you are ready to settle all your son's liabilities right off, they will insist on a settlement in full. If, on the contrary, they see we are in no hurry, they will abate their terms considerably. The longer we wait, the less they will take. I: him stay out in India until he gets his lieutenancy—a matter, probably, of two or three years; and then, I think, we shall find Jordan & Co. likely to listen to reason.' It is good sound advice, Charlie; and, though the chivying of robbers all over the country is not quite our idea of active service, still I can fancy with what a will you'll go for them when you do catch 'em."

By this time they had reached the edge of the plain, and were now apparently entering a wooded country, at the back of which lay the regular jungle. They were about to dismount from their horses, when "crack" went three or four rifles, and as many bullets whistled past their ears. Instantly Hobson, wheeling his steed about, and with a cry, "Ride for it, Charlie," set spurs to his horse. Young Devereux followed his example; though, as he did so, he felt something like a hot iron just graze his arm. When he had gone three or four hundred yards Hobson pulled up his horse,

and, turning round, deliberately surveyed the spot from whence the fire had come.

"By Jove, Charlie," he exclaimed, "we rode right into the wasps' nest, and it is deuced lucky for us, I fancy, that we rather surprised them; if they had only exercised their usual cunning, we should have been either dead or prisoners by this."

"See," replied Charlie, "there are about a dozen of the beggars on the edge of the wood looking at us."

"Yes," replied Hobson, "it is confoundedly unlucky that we should have come upon them as we did; they will know, of course, that we have soldiers with us, and before we can get back to camp, or even start, that fellow Shere Ali will have had up sticks and decamped in some other direction. It is thundering unlucky. We really had a chance to come up with him to-night; but hullo! young man, they have barked you."

"Just a graze," replied Charlie; "but nothing of any consequence; but what will you do now?"

"Oh! we must just get back to camp as quick as we can, and then start in pursuit of our friends; my only hope is that, by perpetually harrying them, we shall drive Shere Ali straight into the hands of one of the other parties out in pursuit of him;" and with that, Hobson put his horse into a gallop, and the pair made their way back to camp as speedily as might be.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

DOINGS ON THE KNAVESMIRE.

We must now go back a little bit in this history, to see how events have fared with people in England. Gilbert Slade had been very little in London since that famous Derby which had utterly broke Devereux. He had run up for a week to help Charlie with his advice in the arrangement of his affairs, and he had also come up for a few days to see him off and bid him God-speed on his departure for India, which had taken place about the end of July; otherwise Gilbert Slade had seen nothing of London that year. He had called upon nobody during those brief visits. He was up strictly on business, and had no wish to advertise his presence in the metropolis. He had never made his appearance in Onslow Gardens, nor, sorely to the disappointment of Mrs. Kynaston, had she ever set eyes upon him since that brief visit he paid her in May. With every reason to believe in Miss Devereux's engagement with Furzedon, Bertie had thought it useless to call on Mrs. Connop. Twice he had done so during that Derby week, and upon each occasion had been met with a "not at home." He had come to the conclusion that this was a distinct intimation that they wished to see no more of him. While he was making up his mind, another had stepped in and carried off the prize. If it had only been any other than Furzedon, he could have borne it better, but that, even with all his money, Miss Devereux could marry such a man as that was incomprehensible in Bertie's eyes; but it was all over now, and for the present, as men do under such circumstances, Gilbert Slade thoroughly realised the hollowness of London society. One morning in September, shortly before the Doncaster Races, Bertie received a letter from his Uncle Norman, in which he said,

"I shall be at York this week for a couple of nights; I shall stay at the Black Swan, and shall throw myself upon your hospitality for dinner. Your regiment has the reputation of doing that sort of thing rather well, and I have no doubt you can make up a rubber for me afterwards. A hotel coffee-room is rather a dull place to put in an evening alone."

"Give Uncle Norman a dinner! I should rather think so," muttered Bertie to himself on reading this note; "I would put him up for a whole week, and be only too glad to do so; but I am puzzled as to what brings him to York just now. Uncle Norman at York during the races is natural enough, but Uncle Norman at York the second week in September is a mystery."

However, whatever might be Norman Slade's object in turning up in the great city of the North, his nephew took care that there should be a note for him at the Black Swan, saying that he should be only too glad to see him every day during his stay; and that if it would be the slightest convenience, he could put him up very comfortably to boot. In due course Norman Slade turned up at the mess of the —th Hussars, and was regarded with due reverence by the younger members of that sporting regiment as a sort of incarnation of all Turf knowledge, and a man who, if he chose, could make wondrous revelations on the subject of races past, present, and to come. When he chose, as we know, Norman could make himself extremely pleasant, and upon this occasion he won golden opinions. The Colonel, in particular, was enchanted with his guest, who manifested the greatest possible interest in the regiment. One thing especially was curious in, and that was, would he have an opportunity of seeing the regiment out? Did they not exercise on the Knavesmire in the early morning at times?

"Yes," replied the Colonel; "but we are not so very early; during this hot weather we begin at seven, and so get our drill over before the heat of the day."

"Then," rejoined Norman, "if I am on the Knavesmire sharp seven, I shall be in time to see your fellows exercise."

"In plenty of time, Mr. Slade," said the Colonel; "indeed, a quarter past will be quite time enough. If you will allow me, I will have a horse there already for you."

"You are very good," rejoined Norman; "but I have no doubt Bertie can manage all that for me."

To which speech Bertie returned a somewhat bewildered assent.