

whose sobriety cannot be relied on? I've long odds in both cases; and, by Jove, I ought to have for it would be hard to say which is the greatest toss-up. I am hard-up enough, heaven knows; and it is a case of which looks most lucrative, watching over the infirmities of my elderly relative, or watching over that peculiar weakness of Bill Smith's. It's a nuisance, a great nuisance; but I can't be in both places, and I think the Honorable Miss Shothouse has it: and I must trust to Bill Smith's eye to his own interest to keep him straight till all is over. Norman won't like it, nor do I; but it can't be helped, and I must write and tell him so."

Norman Slade was much disappointed at Sir Ronald's answer to his note. He stayed his appointed time, and saw Belisarius with the veteran jockey in the saddle do a rattling good gallop on the morning of his departure. "It should come off, Bill," he exclaimed, as he said good-bye; "only take as much care of yourself as you do of the colt, and I think you'll beat 'em all at Epsom."

The opponents of the favorite were apparently well informed. Whether the knowledge that Norman Slade had left Bellaton Moor, and that Bill Smith was left there by himself, influenced their calculations, it is impossible to say, but certain it is that the last few days before the race the horse became a slightly worse favorite in the market than he had been. It was in vain that the British public made him their champion, and put down their money. The ranks of the opposition daily gathered strength, and that most ominous sign of all to a veteran Turf goer presented itself—to wit, that the more money Belisarius was backed for, the worse favorite he became. Norman Slade noted this uneasily, and Sir Ronald, still dancing attendance upon his revered aunt, was equally conscious of the unpleasant phenomenon, but he could not get away, and Miss Shothouse was displaying her accustomed vacillation on the subject of her departure. She showed all the procrastination of Charles II. without his politeness; and, as Sir Ronald said at the expiration of the second day, "the whole thing was a fraud," and that Honorable Miss Shothouse would probably repeat this comedy a good half-dozen times before making her final bow to the public.

It was not till the Saturday before the Epsom that the old lady would admit that the crisis was over, and that there was a fair expectation of her recovery. Sir Ronald waited no longer. He took an affectionate leave of his aunt, expressed the warmest satisfaction that she was still spared to them, and, with no little irritation simmering in his breast, took his way back to town. One of the first persons he sought on his arrival was Norman Slade.

"Very unlucky you couldn't go," observed that gentleman; "it would have been safer; my bulletins from Bellaton are excellent, that is to say, the horse is all right; but of course my information about the man is more hazy. Old Bill has been out every morning himself, I hear, and that's something; but of course there's no one up there whom I could trust to furnish me with the exact state of the case. There is nothing to make one suspect there is anything wrong except this disposition to lay against the colt."

"Well, Bellaton is a pretty close borough. Old Bill is not given to stand any prying into the secrets of his training-ground. The chances are these people don't know anything certain, but are speculating on his past unsteadiness. I'll tell you what, though, old man, there'll be no harm in having a second string."

"By gad, you're right," replied Slade, "I'll see about it at once, and engage the best available jockey, in case Bill is—well—too unwell to ride."

"Rather dull of us not to think of it before," replied the Baronet; "it will be difficult to pick out a good man now, all the best are engaged. A good jockey is always a great point, but over the Derby course it is an essential. That race has been oftener won by riding than any other in England."

"Quite right, we must do the best we can; and if Bill is only himself I'd ask no better jockey; but I'll lose no time in seeing about somebody to take his place."

It may be perhaps because it is the greatest race in England, because it is the greatest race in the world, that, when the finish of the Derby is a very close thing, there is invariably much discussion as to whether with another jockey the second horse ought not to have been first. In '52 it was said that Frank Butler, the victor, could have won upon any one of the first four. In '66, when Lord Lyon defeated Savernake by a head, dissatisfaction was expressed by the supporters of the latter at his rider's performance. They change the jockey at Doncaster, and the Epsom form was confirmed to an eyelash. Veteran turfites still wrangle in club smoking-rooms as to whether Macaroni did beat Lord Clifden, and whether Pero Gomez or Pretender really won the Derby. These are things about which we can only appeal to the judge's verdict. But there is probably no race more calculated to demand all the resources of a fine horseman—nerve, head, judgment of pace, &c.—than the great national contest on Epsom Downs.

As the day drew near, Charlie became feverishly anxious on the subject; he listened eagerly for every rumor he could hear concerning it; and, as may be supposed, in the sporting neighborhood in which he was quartered "the shaves" were numerous. Fresh horses cropped up in the betting who were reported to have won trials that, if true, must have placed the race at their mercy.

Charlie was very anxious that Gilbert should write to his uncle, and once more inquire what he thought of Belisarius's chance; but the other was decided in his rejoinder.

"You don't know my uncle, or you would never suggest such a thing. If I began to bother him about racing, he not only would never tell me anything again; but fight very shy of me to boot. No, when we get up to London I'll just ask him then, and have no doubt that he'll tell me what he knows. I vote we are off Saturday, and make a good long week of it."

(To be continued.)

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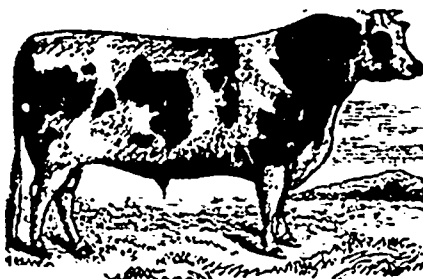
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