

SADDLE AND SABRE.

(Continued.)

"It is difficult for a man to interpret that phrase. We are not as quick as you to read what are reasonable grounds. Some of your sex—and they are those best worth winning—will give a man scant encouragement until he has put such request in formal words. It is natural. A sensible girl is afraid of committing herself before a man has spoken."

"But if a girl has not only given the man no encouragement to speak, but has done her best to warn him that he is about to ask a foolish question—what then?"

He was clever of fence, and fought his uphill battle both doggedly and with tact.

"I think," he replied, gravely, "it should deserve better than to be called a foolish question. When a man lays his life and fortune at a woman's feet he is paying her the greatest compliment that lies within his power, at all events."

"I beg you pardon, Mr. Furzedon," rejoined Lettice, quickly. "I don't pretend to misunderstand you, but you must know this thing cannot be. I welcomed you as my brother's friend; I have given you no cause to suppose that I had any further feelings towards you. Let us remain friends, and forget that this conversation has ever taken place."

"I shall never forget it," he replied, brusquely; "and I refuse to take this for your final answer. I can wait, and trust to time and my devotion to plead for me; but as long as no one else has won your hand I shall ever be a pretender to it. I am answered for the present, and am not likely to intrude upon you again for some time."

"I thank you for the compliment you have paid me," replied Lettice, with some little stateliness, and rising; "but, believe me, my answer is irrevocable."

Ralph Furzedon took the hint and his hat.

"You will make my adieux to Mrs. Connop," he said, with a low bow; "and you won't object to say good-bye;" and as he spoke he extended his hand. Their palms crossed for a moment, and then Ralph Furzedon descended into the street, and began to reflect on the result of the battle.

"That's the end of the first round," he muttered, "to use the language of the prize-ring. Well! I expected to get the worst of it, and I did; but I can hardly be said to have been badly beaten. No; I don't think I threw a chance away. I am now a declared pretender to her hand. A rejected one, it is true. She can plead no ignorance of the state of the case for the future. Moreover, I have had resort to no subtleties, but the very venial one of saying that she will hear no more of my request for some time. Should Belisarius be beaten at Epsom I shall most certainly have to urge the same request again, with the additional argument that a wealthy brother-in-law would represent the good genius that would assist Master Charlie out of his scrape. I only trust that he may still further complicate matters at Epsom. I'm not given to throwing money away, but I should not grudge a good round sum if it brought me Miss Devereux's hand."

It is characteristic of the contradictions of our nature that Ralph Furzedon had never felt such admiration for Lettice as in the moment of his rejection. He was struck with her spirit, and at the same time the womanly way in which she strove to soften her refusal. He had wanted her for his wife; that was nothing. He thought she would further his ambition once placed in that position; but now, for the first time, the feeling of love was aroused within his breast, and he resolved that he would not resign his pretensions to Lettice's hand as long as, by fair means or foul, he saw the slightest chance of winning it; and Furzedon was a man likely to put a very liberal construction on the old adage, "All's fair in love or war."

Mrs. Connop waited until she heard the front door close, and then at once descended to the drawing-room. She was not a little anxious to hear the result of the interview, and, not being given to heating about the bush, went straight to the point at once.

"Well, Lettice," she exclaimed, "what did you say to him? Pooh! child, there is no need to make any mystery about it. I know very well that Mr. Furzedon came down here to-day to ask you to marry him, and I went out of the room to give him a chance of doing so."

"Surely, aunt, you don't think that I ought to have said——"

"Ah! you've said 'no' then. I thought you would. But, as I was told he was determined to ask the question, I thought the sooner it was over the better. Quite right, my dear. I like the other one best, ever so much."

"I don't understand you," rejoined Lettice, a little stiffly.

"Oh! yes, you do, and agree with me, also," retorted Mrs. Connop, laughing. "However, in the meantime, run upstairs, and get your bonnet on; you will only have just time for a cup of tea before the carriage comes round."

Miss Devereux thought it wisest to close the discussion. She did not want to explain that Gilbert Slade had made no sign since last November, and that, though he had certainly given her cause to suppose he cared a good deal about her, he had not quite gone the length that justified a girl in calling him her lover. It was, indeed, rather a sore subject with Miss Devereux at present, and any coupling of her name with Gilbert Slade she was sure to resent sharply.

Up in the North, meanwhile, expectation ran high. All Yorkshire was agog to see the big race of the South once more carried off by a North-country horse. "The fard of ham" was on Belisarius to a man, and at the York Club the latest ludeen concerning Bill Smith's crack was eagerly promulgated and discussed. Some of the old hands, who had witnessed Bill Smith's career from his first race as a stable-boy to the triumphs of his

zenith, and also been present at the mistakes of his later days, shook their heads and said, "Yes, the horse is doing splendidly, no doubt—*how about the man?* You young gentlemen who back Belisarius will do well to remember that the jockey is more difficult to bring fit to the post than the horse."

To which the partizans of Belisarius rejoined, "Nonsense; we know Bill Smith's weakness, of course, but he's not a fool. He can take himself by the head when it is worth his while. He was all right at Newmarket, and you'll see he will be all right at Epsom."

Now though this doubt was in the mouths of a good many people in his own country, yet the way he had ridden his horse in the Two Thousand had generally wiped out all misgivings concerning Bill Smith's sobriety in the South. It was believed that he had turned over a new leaf, and that the discovering himself to be the owner of such a flyer as Belisarius had worked a complete reformation in his character—at least for the present. This more sanguine view of the case was undoubtedly prevalent among the Turf circles in the metropolis, though shrewd observers, like Mr. Black, noted that there was a small knot of speculators who seemed unremitting in their hostility to Belisarius. Clever men, too, and by no means given to bet foolishly; and now that Dick Kynaston's attention had been called to it, he was speedily convinced of the truth of what France had told him. Very cautious and wary were these men, not to be beguiled into laying a longer price, but always prepared to show their disbelief in the Two Thousand winner whenever anybody offered to take half a point less than the odds. What they were going on the Major did not know, and that was a riddle he was very anxious to arrive at.

Curiously, the first hint of the danger that threatened Belisarius came to Kynaston from his wife. "I got a letter from Charlie Devereux this morning," she remarked, as the Major looked into the drawing-room for a moment, previous to marching off to lunch at the club, "and he says that some of the old racing-men at York are rather incredulous about Bill Smith's riding a Derby winner once more. They say the horse is all right, but that the man cannot be trusted to keep from drinking; rather a bore should they prove right, for, as you know, I have backed him what for me is pretty stiffly. However, I don't suppose these 'old fossils' know much about it. I am very sorry for Charlie," continued Mrs. Kynaston, "for, as we know, Dick, when it comes to Turf matters, the 'old fossils' are apt to know a good deal more than young people who are just beginning to study them. Does this jockey, Smith, drink so?"

"Yes," rejoined the Major, "I begin to understand it now. That's why those fellows are so keen to lay against Belisarius. Bill Smith is one of the finest horsemen out, but he can't nowadays be depended upon to keep sober," and with these words the Major left the room.

CHAPTER XXVII.

NEWS FROM BELLATON WOLD.

May crept on; it wanted just one fortnight to the Derby. The mails from the North conveyed a letter that morning of much interest to most of the characters in this narrative. It was addressed to Sir Ronald Radcliffe, Bart., and ran as follows:—

"DEAR RADCLIFFE,—

"There is rarely smoke without fire, and the rumors that reached us from the North were by no means unfounded, although not so bad as reported. The horse never was better; but Bill, undoubtedly, has not altogether stopped celebrating the Two Thousand victory. It was high time somebody came to look after him; and, as you know, he's not very tractable to deal with. Still, he will stand more from either you or me than any one else. I've got him well in hand now, and, though he is a good bit off a tectotaller, yet he will do no harm if I can only keep him where he is. I shall stay here for another week; and then, I am sorry to say, I am compelled to come back to London. Could you take my place here for the last few days? If we can only bring both to the post, all will be right; they'll take a deal of betting on Epsom Downs. Belisarius will strip a few pounds better horse than he did at Newmarket; and I like him better every time I see him gallop. If you possibly can come, do. It is a great coup to land, and we ought to throw no chance away in order to bring it about; and, though I've got Bill pretty straight at present, I don't like leaving him alone. However, if you can come, I'm sure you will.

"Yours always,

NORMAN SLADE."

Sir Ronald knit his brows when he received this letter. He saw clearly that, as a matter of common precaution, it behoved him to relieve Norman Slade at his post; but what was he to do? He had just been summoned to what promised to be the deathbed of an aunt from whom he had considerable expectations; a whimsical old woman, who indulged in periodical visitations of this nature; upon which occasions she was in the habit of summoning all her nearest relations to the ceremony—"a disappointing old woman," as her graceless nephew called her, "who was always going, but never gone." "If," argued Sir Ronald, still knitting his brows over Slade's letter, "she did make a die this time, I dare say it would be all right; but if, after her manner, she comes round, she would cut me out of her will for what she would term my heartless ingratitude and want of affection for her. Hang it all! after humoring her tantrums all these years, it isn't whist to chance offending to her now; it is like paying the premium on a life insurance and letting it drop just as it promised to recoup one. Hang me if I know what to do. I stand to win a good stake on either event. In the case of Belisarius, I know exactly how much; in the case of my venerated aunt, I don't exactly. Which shall it be? Which is most risky; the will of a capricious old woman, or the success of a racer ridden by a jockey