

II.

"So that means that Ladybird won't win." Nat, left alone, was soliloquising.

"He was quite right; nobody else but me can make her face the 'gate' quietly. You scoundrel, Dick Crafton! It's men like you who spoil what might be one of the noblest sports in the world."

Then he made ready to go down to the Farm. But there was another interruption in store for him.

"Here you are, Gran'dad!" cried the sweet voice of his granddaughter, as she ran excitedly forward, up with the lark, and full of the hereditary enthusiasm for the horse. She had been away over the downs watching Ladybird at her work.

"My little girl! Why, where did you spring from?" asked Nat. "I've been out, too, but didn't see you."

She avoided his keen, questioning gaze.

"Isn't it a lovely day for the race?" She put her arm affectionately through his. They stood together thus, watching the racegoers straggling across the course. "Oh, Grandad, I hope Ladybird will win!"

"Hillo! What has my little one got to do with horses and racing, I wonder! Why, you haven't backed Ladybird to win you a fortune, have you?"

"Oh, no; but then, you see, Ladybird has such a pretty name, for one thing; and then—"

"And then what? Don't you trouble your little head about 'osses, Hettie."

"But I must trouble about Ladybird—not for myself, but because I know someone who wants her to win—awfully."

The shaggy eyebrows of the man went up with a jerk.

"You mean young Harry Beckett, of the Old Glebe Farm? I don't see why you should be so much interested in him, my dear. He's a good-hearted, handsome young fellow enough—"

"Do you think him handsome, too, Grandad?"

"What d'ye mean by do I 'think him 'andsome, too? What does it matter to you?"

He looked at her from the winking corner of one eye.

"Well, you know, I've seen him—er—pretty often, Gran'dad; and he seems very nice."

"I daresay. But he's been led away, lassie, led away by them as is a good deal cleverer than himself; and I don't think it was a good day for him when his old father died and left that thoroughbred filly to him."

"You mean Ladybird!" cried the girl. "Oh, she's such a beautiful darling; and she never goes better than for you. You will ride her in the Royal Cup to-day—won't you?"

He awoke again as from a dream, startled by her words, nonplussed for any answer.

He felt what an unfavourable one would mean to her.

"It depends, Hettie—it depends. But I don't see how I can, girl. In fact, now you're here, perhaps you wouldn't mind running to the Farm and telling Harry Beckett—"

"That you won't ride? No, that I'm sure I sha'n't—so there!"

There was a blaze of determination in her brown, fawn-like eyes, a ring of rebellion in her voice.

"Ye see, I'm a bit past ridin' in these big races now, Hettie. Besides, perhaps—perhaps—" He paused as though something was sticking in his throat. "Maybe Ladybird will take it into her head to-day to go off as well for—for—someone else."

Her next words were a rebuke.

"Oh, how can you say it? You know she won't. And just think what it means to Mr. Beckett; if she loses—he will have to sell up and leave the Old Farm."

"I know—I know, my girl; he's backed her to win him a good stake. And I knew his old father before him—well, I did. I'd do all I know to keep him in the Farm, but—"

"You must ride, Gran'dad! It would break his heart to have to leave it."

The old man was still somewhat puzzled by her vehemence in championing the young owner's cause. But certain little birds were beginning to twitter about his ears.

"But what do you know about it, Hettie? You're precious anxious about the young gentleman. You know, likeable as he is, he's been a reckless young beggar, and been a-giving his mind far too much to this nice filly of his. He should leave racin' to them millionaire chaps, who, if thy wins they wins, and if they loses it don't make no odds. You go and think of something else, Hettie."

"But there's Ladybird to think of, too, Gran'dad. She wants so much to win this race. She told me so, as well as she could, while I was patting her this very morning."

"Oh, indeed. She did, did she? Well, she's a young lady, and you're a young lady; and when

gals gets together there's sure to be a bit of talking. But how did you manage to come across her? I saw her in the stable myself. What were you doing near the gallops? And was the owner there, too?—eh—eh? Come, now."

A faint blush stole over the girl's bright, sun-browned face. She knew she was being found out, and was unconcernedly ready for capitulation.

"I was there quite accidentally. Not at the stables," she explained; "at the turn where the straight five-furlong course begins. And you see, Harry—"

Metaphorically she drew rein here, and laughed aloud.

"Harry—eh? Christian names—eh?" grunted Nat. "And what about Harry?"

"He said it all depended on you, Gran'dad, whether Ladybird won or lost; that you understood her as no one else did; that you alone could save him from ruin."

All the childish laughter was gone now; she was a woman fighting for the man she loved best in the world.

"Ruin's an ugly word, Hettie; and it's an ugly thing for them as wants to keep their heads up."

He was not thinking alone of Harry Beckett.

She knew there was no time to lose. She had purposely kept him so that no other jockey could be secured; she must drive her argument home.

"Ah, but you will ride Ladybird in the Cup to-day and save your old friend's son, and—"

The tears stole out from her eyes—a dramatic little touch that was to work wonders.

"And what, child? Speak out, if you've anything more to say—to tell me," demanded Nat. Then suddenly, with a kind of choking spasm of fear. "Hettie—quick, child! Go through the house and out the back way. Go!" he cried sternly.

"Why, Gran'dad? What's the matter?"

He waved her away from the window. There was a look in his face she had never seen there before.

"Do as I bid you, Hettie. There's someone coming here I must meet alone."

"No one that may do harm, Gran'dad?"

"I'll see to that. Oh, no, nothing of that. His sort are all cowards." The latter remark was to himself. "Go!" he cried again, his eyes taking on a glitter that looked cold as ice. "Don't ask any questions, and tell Harry Beckett that, bar accidents, Nat Bradley will ride Ladybird in the Royal Cup to-day, and, what's more, win. And now it's time I was getting ready."

He disappeared into a small inner room.

The girl made to go out at the back; the catch of the gate clicked out of its socket, and a man strode quickly up the path.

III.

Hettie had not quite liked her grandfather's tones and manner. She had never seen him anything like it before. He was an unusually equable and unemotional man. The click of the gate brought her back into the room ere she had well left it.

"Good morning, Miss Hettie. Is your grandfather about? I want to see him immediately."

Mr. Richard Crafton was evidently in a great hurry. His voice struck the girl as conveying the idea of intimidation.

"Oh, I'm sure he is too busy just this minute to see anyone. And I must be off too."

"You all of you seem to be in a great hurry."

"And you, too, evidently, sir. We all have to be smart on a Royal Cup day, you know. Gran'dad's dressing to ride Ladybird. Expect you'll see him in the paddock presently. Good-day, sir."

Mr. Crafton watched the pretty retreating figure with a sigh—and an oath. She had made him feel curiously sentimental on the one side, most confidently savage on the other.

"Oh, goo—good-bye—ta! ta!—little Miss Cocksure!" he called after her. "So the old man's going to ride Ladybird, after all, is he? I watched you come in, my pretty one, and, knowing what I do know, thought you might persuade him to make a fool of himself. That's why I came back."

He put his right hand to the back of him, where was hidden a leather-lined pocket.

As he did so, something seemed to occur to take away the support usually supplied by his stalwart limbs.

The sun, streaming through the open door at its noontide zenith, flashed blindingly upon something and somebody standing before him.

It was Nat Bradley in all the glory of Mr. Harry Beckett's colours.

"Nat Bradley!" gasped the astonished man, steadying himself. "So you *have* changed your mind? You're going to defy me. Right you are; then I'm going to play my trump card."

The jockey said nothing—simply went on with

some of the smaller details of his preparation for the race.

While Richard Crafton stood, as it were, on guard over the door, Hettie rushed in from the back and straight up to the old man.

"Gran'dad, you're going to keep your promise! I knew you would. Ah, you've got the Beckett colours on! Harry is so glad! I've just met him."

Bradley still remained silent; the man at the door was biting his lips.

"Yes, I'm going to keep my word, little one," said Nat, after a pause that seemed interminable.

"I saw the lad with the mare just now, Gran'dad. She's so restless, waiting for you; they're leading her up and down outside."

Richard Crafton had not gone. He was still guarding the door from without, and watching the waiting mare at the same time.

"Do you know, Gran'dad," continued the girl excitedly, "I can see all the grand ladies walking about the lawn from here."

"Yes, and the old racin' blood is up in me, little one!" cried Nat. "I feels it a-tingling all through me. There's nothing like it in the world: to feel 'em gallopin' under ye with them long, level strides—goin' that quick they cuts the daisies with their plates clean as a scythe through a thistle. And so ye think Ladybird looks beautiful, do ye? Trained to the hour, and fit to run for a kingdom?"

"Never mind the kingdom, Gran'dad. I hope she'll win for Harry Beckett."

"Ha, ha! Well, I suppose he's your king, my dear—your King Harry, eh? Ye don't think I'm an old fool, do 'ee, as don't see how the land lies?"

A swift gleam of the light that is never seen except in a woman's eyes when she is in love illuminated the bright young face.

"Yes, Gran'dad; I can't help it! I do love him, and he—he loves me. I don't know why; I'm not half good enough for him."

"Ain't ye, indeed? All I know is, if Master Harry Beckett gets you, he gets the best little girl in the world—bar none; that's Nat Bradley's opinion—bar none! But I musn't stop here jawin'."

She gave him a hurried kiss.

"Gran'dad—it is so good of you. Oh, yes, I remember you said you'd never ride racing again; and you're doing it for Harry's sake."

"And yours, little one—mostly yours. Yes; when Nat Bradley makes a promise he likes to keep it." The strong, nimble fingers gave the whip a tighter grip. "And it ain't blackguards like Dick Crafton as can stop him, neither. Ah, there's Ladybird coming to fetch her jockey—to keep him up to time. D'ye think I'd disappoint her? There she is—proud as Punch and pretty as a picture; and she's goin' to run for my little girl's heart, and, bar accidents, win. For Nat Bradley's last race is goin' to be the best he ever rode in his life."

As he hurried to the door he found his way barred by the bulky form of Dick Crafton.

"Stop, Nat Bradley! You've ridden your last race already, unless you keep your promise to me, and get out of those colours."

Hettie had run to her room to complete her toilet for the grand stand. So the two were alone.

Bradley eyed his man for a moment with a look that conveyed his answer better than any mere words could have done.

"What are you going to do?" demanded Crafton. "The girl will be back in a minute to ask what it's all about. Am I to tell her about Gadfly II.?"

The jockey smiled an amazing smile, that went out suddenly like a snuffed candle.

"The deuce take Gadfly II., and you too, Dick Crafton! I shall not take off these colours, and I'm going to ride Ladybird in the Royal Cup, and win on her. And I've got to go—now."

He gave a step forward, his whip raised above his head. Crafton felt the swishing breath of it as it flew upwards in the strong hands.

"There's the bell. They're clearing the course. Let me go!"

The huge bulk of Dick Crafton had its weight against the open door. With a rapid, tricky movement of the body—a low dodge of the minor wrestling rings—he shut the door and got on the other side of the jockey, into the room.

"Turning awkward, Mr. Bradley, are you?" he snarled. "Put a hand on that door, and I'll riddle that right wing of yours."

"Bah!" laughed Bradley. "Frightened by a coward like you? You and your toy revolver!"

Hettie was in the room again, dressed in her simple finery for the races. She ran towards her grandfather instantly.

"Stand back, you girl there!" shouted the infuriated bully. He stood now with his back to the further wall of the room.

"Take that, Nat Bradley—you fool; and thank yourself for it."

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