



NAT BRADLEY'S LAST RACE

A Story of The Royal Cup

By CAMPBELL RAE-BROWN



HERE'S no doubt about her; the mare's all right. Yes, I always likes to have a look at 'em on the morning of the race; and, as I say, the mare's all right."

He was a garrulous old chap, except when questioned about anything in connection with the thoroughbreds he had ridden so oft and well for—oh, well, it doesn't matter—but it was a good long time, anyway.

Not that he was what would be called old, as men generally go, but he was old so far as he certainly could give a score of years, and likely enough a good beating, to any of his contemporaries of the saddle. It was only once and again, however, that he rode at all now. But when especially "fancying" any particular mount, the owner was only too delighted to indulge "good old Nat Bradley" in his preference.

This morning Nat looked particularly smart and workmanlike in his well-made corduroy breeches and leggings, tweed cap, crammed tight down about his ears, and especially rakish-looking pair of tan boots.

The glow of vigorous health was upon the wind-roughened cheeks as he entered his cottage, on the borders of the popular Northern race-course; and an observer would have noticed how evidently satisfied he was with his morning visit to his friend Beckett's stables at the adjoining Old Glebe Farm.

"Yes," he muttered on; "if everything and everybody else is all fair and square and above-board, Ladybird will want a lot of beating for the Royal Cup."

He glanced through the wide-open door at the vista of sweeping down-land, and to where, away in the hollow, gleamed the white tops of the stands; beyond these again, following with his keen eyes the serpentine bends of the course, distinctly defined by the "rails" that glistened here and there in the sunlight as the noontide rays fell upon them with their dazzling glare.

"She'll win; that's Nat Bradley's opinion, anyway—and if he don't know what he's a-talking about where 'osses is concerned, then I don't know nothin', that's all."

A big shadow fell upon the threshold, and a rather big man entered the room.

He had a big blustering way with him, doubtless meant to be taken for an abounding honesty of purpose.

"Good morning, Bradley," said the big voice. "Nice weather for the Cup day. You look well and saucy yourself. Going to ride Ladybird, I hear?"

It was an assertion more than a question, and there was a note in it that did not ring so pleasantly as the speaker's opening salutation.

"Mussn't believe all ye hear, Mr. Crafton. On-looking's the best game for old 'uns like me."

The old jockey continued pulling at his pipe, his eyes still upon the distant gleaming rails.

Mr. Richard Crafton gave a curious little laugh.

"Ha! ha! The same wily old fox as ever. But you do intend riding Beckett's filly to-day, and that's why I came to see you."

"Perhaps to congratulate me on the fact of my getting a mount at all, Mr. Crafton. Oh, I've still got my license, you see."

He spoke with a touch both of feeling and meaning.

He gave one or two more strenuous pulls at his clay, then put it down. Enough pipe was all very well—too much, bad for the "hands."

"Certainly—and why not keep on your license: you're as hale as ever. And you know the old saying?" added the other cleverly: "Let the dead past bury its dead—if it can be buried."

"A man can always profit by the experience of his past, at any rate, Mr. Crafton, and make up his mind never to be led into temptation again. Ah, thank God, he can always do that."

Dick Crafton touched him familiarly on the shoulder. Almost imperceptibly the jockey resented the little action, and with something like a shudder.

"Come, come, Nat! Don't get so mighty serious. I haven't come to rake up the past, but to talk business about the present. Make the best of *that*, say I; and the past and the future will look after themselves."

Bradley glanced uneasily at the clock.

"So ye say, Mr. Crafton; so ye say. The time is getting on, sir. I promised to go down to the Farm."

He took up his cap.

"The Old Glebe Farm, eh? Harry Beckett's place? Going to have a look at your mount, eh—Ladybird?"

"To Mr. Beckett's—yes. I promised to go back again soon as I could. I'm afraid I can't wait any longer."

"I see. You've been to see Ladybird and her owner already this morning. Gave the filly an early gallop, perhaps?"

The man's tone was changing very notably, though by easy gradations.

Nat Bradley remained silent. He knew his business and his temporary employer's.

"And you've promised to ride Beckett's mare? Don't be in *quite* such a hurry, my dear fellow." Nat was on the threshold of the door. "I've a word or two more to say to you, Mr. Bradley—and it's always just as well to guard against eavesdroppers."

By a curiously sudden movement he had managed to shove the door to with a bang.

The jockey started, but pulled himself together again immediately.

"There are no eavesdroppers here, and I have no secrets; and I'm in a hurry, Mr. Crafton."

He moved to reopen the door.

"Not so fast," said the other, throwing his bulky body in the way. "You may not have any secrets—though I was under the impression you had *one*. But I have, and I want you to share it with me."

"Mr. Crafton," said Bradley, squaring his strong shoulders, "I wish to hear nothing of any man's private business. Now and for the future Nat Bradley's actions should be such as will bear the full light of day."

"A very excellent resolve, my dear sir. But it can scarcely apply to stable secrets, can it now?"

"I don't know any stable secrets. They're mostly things as is invented by the low-class sporting papers."

"You're very innocent," sneered Mr. Crafton: "but I'm going to tell you one."

"I'd much rather you wouldn't, sir. It can't concern me."

"It does—very much, Bradley."

He went close up to the man to fix him with his own blinking, unsteady eyes.

"Listen, Nat Bradley—Nat Bradley, who rode in the notorious race when Gadfly II., which you rode, was so unexpectedly beaten two years ago."

"Gadfly II.," murmured the jockey.

He was like one still dazed by sleep awaked from a dream.

"Mr. Crafton, you're not going to bring that up again? Remember the circumstances—the temptation—what I had gone through."

"I see. You're beginning to refresh your memory, and to remember the inconvenient fact that the two men still live, and will be present at the race to-day, who can bear witness on oath that you 'stopped,' purposely and by criminal means, Colonel Pleydell's horse, Gadfly II., which, as I say, you

rode, from winning the Ascot Plate two years ago."

"Mr. Crafton," said the old man very quietly, "this race to-day is the last one I shall ever ride in my life. Mine has been a long service in the saddle, and all but once, when led away by temptation, it has been an honourable one."

"Exactly," said his inquisitor sleekily; "and I, as your old friend and confidant, Bradley, should like you to leave the turf with that good name still untarnished."

"Thank you, Mr. Crafton—thank you," cried Nat; "for my little girl Hettie—my granddaughter's sake—I'd like to remain clean, sir."

"Then, for your little girl's sake, my good man, I think you had better take my advice."

He went on relentlessly: "In the big race to-day you have promised to ride Mr. Beckett's Ladybird?"

"But I don't see how anyone could have known that," said Bradley. "I only made up my mind this morning."

The other laughed.

"Ah! we of the 'clever division' are shrewd enough to *guess* some things, Nat; and I knew you'd be up on Ladybird if they could get you."

"Well, you see, she goes better for me than for anyone else."

"Precisely; they want you to ride to make certain of winning."

"The filly wants careful riding by one who knows her," said Nat, in the same quiet tones.

"Don't I know it? Haven't I seen her at the 'gate'? She'd never get away at all if anyone else was to ride her." He looked suspiciously around, lowering his voice. "Well, I don't want her to get away. It wouldn't suit my book for Ladybird to win; and now you know my little secret."

Nat Bradley winced as though under the sharp cut of a whip.

"Good God! what do you mean? You haven't come here to tempt me again, Mr. Crafton? You're my evil spirit, seeking to destroy my living soul."

"On the contrary, my dear man—your good fairy." The voice was silky and insinuating, then rose, note by note, to the very limit of craft and cruelty. "Your good fairy, who would keep your good name spotless to the last. If I and another care to whisper but one word to the stewards here to-day, next week Nat Bradley, the well-known and hitherto highly-respected jockey, would be warned off the turf as a rogue."

The old man was at the open casement of the window, looking with half-blinded eyes out on to the wide rolling downs.

"And now what are you going to do?" asked the other. "Remember your granddaughter. Don't be selfish, and think only of what the scandal would mean to you personally."

"Mr. Crafton—stop! I—I see things in a new light now."

"Be quick, Bradley. It's not long to the race now. What are you going to do? Once and for all: Ladybird must not win."

The jockey turned slowly away from the window, catching sight as he did so of a string of horses making their way down to the paddock.

"You—you don't want me to 'pull' her? Not that?" he said in a thick voice.

"I simply don't want you to ride her. Quick! Do you promise me that you won't? You know the consequences!"

"I promise, Mr. Crafton; it's for the little girl's sake. I'll tell them that I cannot ride Ladybird."

"Then I won't bother you any longer. I can depend on you, I know. Good-day for the present, Bradley."

Richard Crafton considered he had brought to a close a good morning's work, so strolled on to the downs to watch developments in connection with Mr. Beckett's change of jockeys.