

SADDLE AND SABRE.

(Continued).

Silently they went on in the same monotonous jog-trot, for Hobson had sternly ordered there should be no talking in the ranks, and impressed upon his men that their march must be conducted with as little noise as possible. Mile after mile was thrown behind them, and still the advanced guard reported "no glimpse of the enemy." Still the footprints of a large body of horses were ever in their front. Hobson's face wore an anxious expression, while young Devereux chafed inwardly at what he irreverently termed "the slowness of his captain."

"If it had been left to him, he would have advanced at a hand gallop, the result of which would have been, that if he failed to come up with the foe in less than two hours, the horses would have been about ridden to a stand still, while if he did succeed in overtaking them his men would have laboured under the disadvantage of being upon half-blown cattle."

However, Hobson had too much experience to fall into any such error. If his face wore a thoughtful expression, it was because he was calculating how much longer he could jog along at the moderate pace he was going, without pulling up to give men and horses a temporary rest. Experience had taught him that the dacoits managed to do with very short halts; and he and his men would be, therefore, constrained to do the like. It was likely to be a severe strain upon both men and horses for six-and-thirty hours or more; for perhaps two days and nights, he calculated, the whole party would have to do with very little rest. "As for the men," thought Hobson, "they must contrive to eat and sleep in the saddle, but pull up to bait the horses we must." Water, too, was becoming a serious consideration. The men's water-bottles, he knew, must be pretty well emptied; and then, again, what was to be done about the horses? He had no idea where or when they would come upon it. However, Hobson comforted himself with the reflection that water was as necessary to Shere Ali as to himself, and that the dacoits must know of a stream on their road. His mind was destined to be speedily set at rest on one point. Suddenly, shots were heard in the front, and the advanced guard were seen falling rapidly back. Sergeant Rivers hurriedly reported that they had come upon the rear of the dacoits, apparently unexpected by the latter. The marauders were marching in rather irregular and desultory fashion, but closed up and faced about the minute they discovered their pursuers.

"They mean fighting, sir, never fear," said the sergeant, as he finished his report.

"Is there a large body of them?" asked Hobson.

"Rather difficult to say, sir," replied the sergeant; "but they've formed across the road."

"Mr. Devereux," said Hobson, "take ten files, creep round the jungle to the right, so as to take 'em in flank. I'm going to attack in front at once; but nothing demoralises these black fellows like finding their assailants have got round their flank. You had better go with him, Rivers. One moment, Devereux: get well round, remember, almost towards their rear, before you attack; never fear but what you'll get plenty of fighting."

Charlie touched his helmet; moved rapidly to the rear; told off his score of men; and then, accompanied by Rivers, plunged into the jungle. Hobson, without further delay, at once dashed at his enemy in front; but the dacoits stood their ground, and evidently meant to offer a stubborn resistance.

The English soldiers had dismounted, and, in skirmishing order, had advanced rapidly along the road, and had spread through the jungle on either side of it. But the robbers were much too cunning to keep on the road; they quickly resorted to the cover on either side of it, and the rattle of the musketry became now continuous. Taking advantage of every tree, the soldiers closed rapidly in on their foes, but the latter apparently had no intention of meeting the Feringhees at close quarters. They retreated sulkily before them, at the same time yielding ground slowly, and disputing it yard by yard.

Charlie Devereux meanwhile was doing his best to carry out his instructions, and, though the rattle of the musketry made both himself and his men impatient to take part in the fray, yet he resolved in his own parlance to "ride strictly to orders;" which, however, were made the more difficult to carry out from the fact of the robbers falling back, and which were destined to end most unfortunately for Charlie. Shere Ali, flushed with the successes which had attended his late exploits, and finding himself—much against his will—brought to bay, determined, as he said, to read the Feringhees a lesson. His force very much outnumbered that of Hobson, and it had occurred to him to put in practice the same manoeuvre that his antagonists had employed. He had detached quite a third of his force, under one of his ablest lieutenants, with similar orders to those of Devereux. The result was obvious; these two parties, each stealing round to fall upon their adversary's flank, must come into contact. And Devereux and his party, instead of surprising the robbers, suddenly found themselves surrounded by the enemy in numbers of fourfold their own strength.

With a shout of "Follow me!" Devereux dashed straight at the dacoits with the intention of cutting his way through, and then falling on the flank of the main body in compliance with his instructions. But weight of numbers brought the English soldiers back, and the result of a few minutes' sharp fighting saw Charlie stretched senseless from a sabre cut dealt by the grim old sowar who led the enemy's flanking party. Sergeant Rivers, who was now left in command, made two desperate charges in the hopes of at least carrying Devereux off with him, but it was in vain, the robbers were too numerous for him, and he was eventually driven back on the main body, with the loss of half his men.

But Hobson understood his business, and, as soon as he became aware of the fact that his flank was turned, he fell back and rapidly showed a front in the direction of his fresh assailants; in short, the English formation speedily became that of a somewhat irregular square, and their leader confined himself at present to the defensive. Hobson and his men had not fought the Pandies for nothing; he had miscalculated the strength of his antagonists, and had not calculated upon Shere Ali's crafty manoeuvre, but he laughed at the idea of the dacoits, however numerous, breaking his formation. In vain did Shere Ali urge on his men, and exhort them not to spare the infidel dogs, nor to leave a Feringhee alive to see the sun go down. After one or two half-hearted attempts the marauders recognized that the Feringhees were a very tough nut to crack; the deadly Enfield scattered havoc in their ranks, and they eventually recoiled, cowed and discomfited. Shere Ali gnashed his teeth with rage; but he, too, was quick to understand that the massacre of a troop of English soldiers was a very different thing from that of a couple of soubadoors and their native escort. He drew off sulkily like a wounded tiger baulked of his prey. And Hobson took advantage of the lull to reckon up his casualties. It had been a sharp brush, and, though the dacoits were strewn pretty thickly on the ground, yet his own loss was considerable for an affair of this nature. He was much concerned to hear that Charlie Devereux had fallen, and no sooner were the robbers fairly in retreat than Sergeant Rivers and a party were sent out to bring in their officer. It was possible he might have been killed; and, at all events, it was their duty to see they left no wounded behind them. But the dacoits had made sure work of the fallen, the wounded had been butchered where they lay. One thing only was extraordinary—Charlie Devereux, whether dead or alive, had disappeared.

Hobson looked very grave when it was reported to him that Mr. Devereux was missing. Anything was better than this. Shere Ali's ferocious character was well known; and even the men felt that their comrades who lay cold and stark in the jungle had met with a more merciful fate than was probably reserved for the officer who had led them. That he had been carried off by the dacoits there could be no doubt. It was hardly likely that they would have done this unless he had been alive. And the toughest veterans among them shook their heads ruefully over the sort of mercy that Shere Ali was likely to mete out to a captive in the hour of his defeat. Hobson's resolve was soon made: in half an hour he was once more pressing on the footsteps of his retreating foe; he was resolved to stick to Shere Ali's skirts till men or horses gave out. He would track this human tiger to his stronghold, or prevent his ever reaching it. In face of a very hot pursuit, it was possible that Shere Ali would think it best not to betray the secret of his citadel; he was far too shrewd not to understand, that once known, his capture became a simple matter of a few days. The English could bring up force to overwhelm him in a marvellously short time. Hobson knew, moreover, that his own party was only one of a perfect chain of patrols, sent forth for the capture of the dacoit chief. "It was odds," he thought, "if he could not capture Shere Ali himself, he would succeed in hunting him into the hands of some other patrol of the cordon." And therefore he continued to hang upon the trail of the dacoits with untiring pertinacity.

CHAPTER XLII.

MRS. KYNASTON'S DISAPPOINTMENT.

Bertie Slade walked away in a very different state of mind from Onslow Gardens to that in which he had arrived here. What a fool he had been! Ingeniously tormenting himself about Lettie's betrothal, when all the while no such engagement ever existed. Well, it was all right now, and he troubled little what became of Furzedon, though he felt pretty certain that Norman Slade would take good care that righteous retribution was dealt out to him. Then he thought of how he had fallen into this mistake. He was quite certain that it was from Charlie he first heard of it; but he remembered what Lettie had said, "That some body must have put it into his head, for that her brother was the last man to arrive at such a conclusion from his own observations." And then it flashed across him that he also had heard it from other lips. Mrs. Kynaston had told him the same story. Was it not possible that Charlie's knowledge of his sister's engagement had been derived from the same source? He turned this over in his mind as he walked along. Charlie was very thick with Mrs. Kynaston; and Bertie remembered well it was just after that flying visit of young Devereux's to town that he told this bit of news. "And, by heaven!" muttered Bertie to himself, "I recollect now. He said he heard it from Mrs. Kynaston, and remarked how odd it was that he should have the first tidings of his sister's intended marriage from any other but herself."

Bertie Slade looked at his watch. It was early yet, he thought; he had still plenty of time before dinner, somehow he didn't seem to have half as much to do as he thought he had that morning. The fact was, the important part of his business in town was already brought to a satisfactory conclusion. He ought to call and wish Mrs. Kynaston good-bye before he sailed. "I'd make any bet that this rumor was a bit of her handiwork; but why? What object could she have in setting such a report afloat? I shouldn't fancy her a mischievous woman either." And still puzzling over Mrs. Kynaston's motives Gilbert Slade arrived at the little house in Mayfield and was forthwith ushered into Mrs. Kynaston's drawing-room.

"Mr. Slade," exclaimed that lady, her eyes sparkling with genuine surprise, "it is ages since I've seen or even heard of you. Sit down, do, and give an account of yourself."

"There is not much to be told," he replied; "we got through the winter at York pretty much as they always do up there. We hunted all day and danced all night; rode as hard as we dared, and valsed as long as we could last."