

SADDLE AND SABRE.

(Continued.)

"Ha—ha!" laughed the Major, and it was one of those mellow laughs which almost instinctively carried the hearers away with it. "What times those were! What constitutions we all had in those days, and, Heaven help us, how shamefully ignorant we were on the subject of wine and cookery! Just you try that champagne, Norman.—Here, waiter, get Mr. Slade a clean glass—Don't be afraid of it: there's no gout in it, and even if there is, upon my soul its worth risking an attack for."

Norman Slade, a dark, wiry little man, whose age defied all conjecture, filled his glass gravely, and, as he tasted it, said: "Yes, it's rare good stuff, but you ought to have laid the foundation of *podagra* pretty substantially by this time."

"Yes, it was the Exhibition year, and they wanted some cavalry just to show off before the big swells who came over to see Paxton's glass-house," continued the Major. "So they brigaded five regiments of light cavalry at Hounslow, and, you may guess, with all that going on in London, that the way our young ones streamed up to town every day was a caution. Except the unhappy subaltern for the day, I should think there wasn't an officer left in any one of the regiments."

"And you were the fellows the rest of us were paying taxes to provide for."

"Of course you were," retorted the Major. "We looked well, were full of go, and did very well for ornamental purposes, which was all you wanted in those days. We didn't do so badly at the Crimea as long as we lasted; the worst of it was we were so soon used up. However, they don't stand those sort of larks now; do they, Bertie?"

"Well," replied the young man addressed, "I don't think the authorities would stand some of the things you've been recounting."

Bertie Slade was nephew to both these gentlemen. Norman's brother had married a Miss Braddock, and hence the connection: and, different as the two men were, was, strange to say, an equal favorite with both of them. No greater contrast than the two brothers-in-law could be conceived. The one, open-hearted, full of jest and story, with the art of dining as the main pursuit of his life. The other, a quiet, self-contained, reticent man, whose passion was the Turf, with a dry, caustic wit of his own, who often dribbled out a thing that brought down the laugh of the smoking-room of the club to which he was affiliated. Capable, too, of biting sarcasm, if exasperated, and it was not very difficult to move Norman Slade's wrath.

"Have a glass of claret," said the Major, "or a glass of Madeira if you prefer it, while I relate another reminiscence of those times. As I have said, we all trooped up to London pretty well every day. Well, in those days, there was a very famous supper-house just off the Haymarket, which was much frequented by the soldiers. Indeed, if Her Majesty's officers, to speak metaphorically, ever did rally round the old flag, it was that particular supper-house in '51. The precious institution has long since disappeared, but, about three in the morning in those days, you were sure to find fellows from Woolwich, men from Hounslow, all anxious to pick up some one to share a hansom home. Indeed, as far as the Hounslow division, as they called us, went, we formed a perfect procession of hansoms; constantly ten or a dozen of them proceeding in file past Hyde Park Corner on their way to our quarters. Well, there was usually considerable difference about the fare when we arrived at Hounslow. The cabbies invariably argued that they had waited a good bit for us, and then demanded an excessive tariff for the time we had employed them. Now, remember the prize ring was by no means dead in England in those days, and most of us had more or less learnt to use our hands pretty smartly; a turn up or two with the cabmen became at last quite an orthodox finish to the evening, and we seldom came home without a fare or two being referred to the arbitration of battle. No need to tell you that the London cabman is pretty wide awake, and, as our fellows invariably went on the double-or-quits system, the Hounslow lot were soon taken up by some pretty clever bruisers amongst them. Well, it was a bright June morning, about five o'clock, and the cabmen were in great feather; they had sent down that night a couple of semi-professionals, and two or three of our best men had been handsomely polished off. We'd a big empty barrack room, containing nothing but some empty wine-cases, where these little differences were adjusted. They were glove fights, you must remember, so that our fellows didn't get so dreadfully marked as you might suppose. It was all over, the successful cabmen had carried away their double fares, and were gone, when the attention of those who were left of us was suddenly called to Jerry Moclere. I and one or two others recollected seeing him at the beginning of the scrimmage struggling with a small cabman in the corner, but we had all been too absorbed in the fight to take further note of his proceedings. Now he was sitting on a champagne-case mopping his brows with a cambric handkerchief, and exclaiming, in maudlin tones 'Oh, dear, what a time I've had of it! Do, for goodness sake, get me a hammer and a few nails, some of you fellows.' 'What's the matter, Jerry?' we exclaimed; 'what's the matter, old man?' 'Oh, dear, what an evening I've had,' he replied, in half-crying tones. 'What a trouble he has been to me; for Heaven's sake get me a hammer and nails.' 'What do you want—what's the matter?' we cried. 'Oh, don't,' he said, still half-weeping; 'oh, dear, what a time I've had. You never saw such a disagreeable little beggar.' 'What do you mean, Jerry—what is it?' 'The little beast,' he replied, in a broken voice; 'he wouldn't go into the case, though I told him I wanted to send him to my mother. It'll please the dear old lady. But I've got him in at last, thank goodness! do help me to nail him down at once, the discontented little brute! I can feel him still wriggling about.' 'Do you mean to say,' we cried, 'that you've got a man in the case?' 'Got him in,' he

returned, lugubriously, 'yes, and it has taken me the whole night to get him there. 'Now do, like good fellows, bring the nails and a direction card.' But here we thought it was high time to intervene. Jerry, who had attained a high state of maudlin drunkenness, was carried off to bed, earnestly requesting that the case might be sent by the first train in the morning to his mother. Of course, we precious soon had the top off the case, and high time, for the small cabman inside was quite past making any further efforts on his own account. Indeed, it required the help of a doctor to bring him round, and a handsome solatium on Jerry's part to lush up the business. Poor Jerry! A shell at Balaklava, as I daresay some of you know, killed as good a fellow as ever crossed saddle. Now, gentlemen, come along, and we'll have a cigar and coffee downstairs."

"Well, Bertie, how's the regiment getting on? Still in its chronic state of difficulties as regards ways and means, I suppose?"

"Yes," replied Gilbert Slade, laughing; "we still hold a ten pound note in much veneration, but, fortunately, we are not tried quite so high at Aldershot as they were in the days of your Hounslow campaign. The powers that be don't stand such incessant running up to town—a restriction which, though unpleasant, keeps us afloat."

Gilbert Slade was a subaltern in his uncle's old corps, and, of course, amongst the seniors were several who had been in the regiment with him. Besides, the Major never missed the annual dinner, and, indeed, had much to say to its management. They said at the Albion that Major Braddock was a very fastidious gentleman, but, as the *chef* added enthusiastically, "he is a judge, and it's quite a pleasure to cook for him." So that one way and another Major Braddock had never lost touch of his old regiment, and knew something about pretty well every officer in it.

"I suppose you'll be moving in the spring," he said, as he lit a big cigar. "Yes," replied Gilbert; "it's our turn to move, and, I suppose, in April, we shall go to the Northern district; but where I don't exactly know—Manchester, I'm afraid."

"And why afraid?" rejoined Major Braddock. "Merchant princes, bless you who know how the thing should be done. If you play your card properly, you ought to manage to get your legs under the mahogany of the best houses, and wind up by marrying a hundred thousand pounds. Don't tell me, sir! It's not often a young fellow gets such a chance early in life. I can only say I regard it as sending the regiment to play by the waters of Pactolus, and it'll be a disgrace to the lot of you if you ere know want afterwards."

"All I know is that Manchester is not a popular quarter with the Dragoons generally," rejoined Gilbert, laughing. "However, it is by all means settled yet that that is our destination."

"Going on leave?" asked the Major drily.

"Yes—am on leave, indeed, now, though I shall probably run back to Aldershot for a night to arrange one or two little matters that I left unsettled when I came away. Then I am going to stay for a little while with some friends in Nottinghamshire, where I am promised a few days with the Belvoir."

"Ah!" said the Major, "you'll have to look lively to hold your own with the Duke's. It's a rare country, and if you've the luck to throw in good sport, you will find it will try the best horse in your stable to live with them."

And then the conversation became general, reverting to, amongst other things—as it was apt to do in those days—what a friend of mine used to call the great annual problem, namely, what was to win the forthcoming Derby, and about this there was, needless to say, much diversity of opinion. In these days men trouble their heads very much less concerning the solving of that riddle, and it is not until the race is near at hand that much interest is manifested about it.

Gilbert Slade was a shrewd observer, and he noticed that, whereas the Major and the other men had much to say about it, and expressed their opinions freely, pooh poohing each other's judgment with much distaste, Norman Slade, who, as Gilbert well knew, had far more knowledge of the subject than all the others put together, smoked silently, and listened to the talk with a somewhat derisive smile on his countenance. At last he appeared to point blank to give them his views on the subject.

"Can't my good fellow," replied Norman, drily; "I haven't got a view about it what—. I simply say I don't know. If you consider advice worth anything, it is merely that it is best let alone for the present."

"Well, Norman," said the Major, laughing, "we certainly can't be so to have got much out of you."

Slade simply shrugged his shoulders in reply, and turned the conversation. Those who knew Norman Slade were quite aware of two things, first, that you might as well try to extract information from an oyster as any coming Turf event as from him, secondly, on the rare occasions when he did vouchsafe a hint, it was sure to be well worth following. Peter Gilbert had been benefited as much as any man from such hints: he was a great favorite with that somewhat sarcastic uncle of his, and he had good sense never to trouble him with questions about these matters. Gilbert Slade had a very shrewd head on his shoulders. He was a popular man in his regiment, but there was a touch of his uncle Norman's reticence in his character. He most assuredly did not wear his heart upon his sleeve, nor did he unbosom himself quite so readily to his chums as many of his age do. So far, his life at present could not be said to have been eventful; he had knocked about with his regiment from one garrison to another for the last four years, had always plenty of houses open to him in the leave-season, and enjoyed a run in London as much as most men.

"Curious," muttered Gilbert, as he strolled homewards, "the difference between these two uncles of mine. As far as giving me a dinner and writing me a moderate cheque if I got into difficulties, I've no doubt the Major would stand to me like a man; but in a serious scrape I fancy I