

SADDLE AND SABRE.

(Continued.)

The man could ride as well half-drunk as sober, save in one respect; and it is just that which invariably cuts short the career of a jockey who takes to drinking, namely, that in the critical moments of a race he lost his head. Instead of taking advantage of every point in the game, he failed to note what his antagonists were doing; he got muddled, he timed his rush either too soon or too late. That deadly rush of his, for which he had once been so famous, and which had stretched so many races out of the fire on the very post, was now apt to be delivered at the wrong time. He who had been wont to measure his supreme effort to the very stride, now either won his race two lengths before the chain, or perhaps the same the other side of it, but he failed to win at the winning post. Gradually his riding fell away from him; owners naturally ceased to employ a jockey upon whose sobriety there was no dependence. The same pitiless authority whom we have quoted above as giving such a laudatory opinion of Bill Smith's riding, now said, "that he threw away more races than any man in England." The great stable of the North, which had held first claim on his services for many years, had now withdrawn its patronage; and the world generally frowned on the once-famous jockey. Still, every now and then he astonished the Turfites by a bit of brilliant riding worthy of his best days. It was evident that his right hand had not lost its cunning, nor his nerve failed him; and that if only he could keep from drink, the man was as fine a horseman as ever. Ah! the infinite conjectural probabilities of those "ifs!"

Bill Smith took the neglect of his old patrons bitterly. That he had lost the greater part of his business soured the man. True, it was from his own fault; and in his own breast he most likely acknowledged that it was so; but it rarely happens that upon these occasions a man does not put his own sins upon other people, and think all the more hardly of them on that account. In his palmy days, too, Bill Smith had been arrogant and coarse of speech to most of the Turf officials with whom he came in contact; a bully amongst the younger jockeys; and a very unscrupulous rider, to say the least of it, among those of his own standing. A man like this has not many friends when the tide turns against him; and, though his brethren of the saddle were chary yet of provoking the rough side of "Black Bill's" tongue, they made no disguise of their satisfaction when he threw a race away in consequence of his besetting failing. Two of his old friends there were who stood staunchly to him, in spite of his transgressions, and these were Norman Slade and Sir Ronald Radcliffe.

"I can't quarrel with the old fellow, Norman," Sir Ronald had observed after one of Bill Smith's later *puerilities*. "He's put me in for too many good things in his time for that, but I'll back him no more. He simply threw that last race away by coming too late."

It would have been well for Sir Ronald if he had adhered firmly to that resolution.

"Well," said Slade, after a pause of some minutes, "very little sleep does for me as a rule, but I feel tired to-night, and, as you know, when in the country am always an early man in the morning. I think I'll be off to bed. Shall you be out with the horses to-morrow morning?"

"No," returned the jockey. "I'm not rid of this confounded gout yet, and I am especially ordered to be careful about taking cold. You had better wrap well up, for you'll find the air confounded keen on the wolds."

"I know all about it," rejoined Slade. "I suppose I shall find Tom Parrott in charge?"

"Yes, he is a right good lad, is Tom. I don't know how I should get on without him, for I've been able to look after the horses very little all this winter. Sure you won't have anything more before you go?"

"No, good-night," rejoined Slade, as he picked up a handle-candlestick off the sideboard, "and I hope the enemy will let you sleep to-night. When you come down to breakfast I shall be able to tell you what I think of the three-year-olds."

Bill Smith replied with a grimace, and, turning to the fire, observed, as Norman left the room, "There's mighty cold comfort in that."

A little before eight the next morning saw Norman Slade attired in breeches, gaiters, stout boots, and shooting-jacket, plodding up the winding road that led to the plateau. There, walking up and down, clothed in the rugs, were some half-score horses bestridden by stable-boys, the whole evidently under the control of a little man riding a clever-looking little pony, and who, though he was every day of five and thirty, was perhaps better known by the *soubriquet* of Bill Smith's head lad than by his legitimate appellation of Tom Parrott. The string, with one or two exceptions, were the property of Bill Smith himself, for few people cared to entrust the preparation of their horses to a man with Bill's unfortunate reputation. If he could not curb his propensity for strong waters when such urgent call upon his facilities was demanded as on the racecourse, was it likely that he would put any check upon himself on the training-ground? And the Turf, like all other professions, requires sobriety among its votaries.

Tom Parrott cantered briskly towards Norman the minute he saw him striding across the grand expanse of springy turf. It was not that he was going to do anything that all the world might not have seen, but he had all the instinctive jealousy of most trainers at finding his charges watched in their work.

"Mr. Slade," he exclaimed, as he recognised his visitor. "Blamed if I didn't think it was one of those woundy tents. Not, I am sorry to say, that we have anything worth their spying about, but I can't abide the varmin'."

"Glad to see you looking so well, Tom," rejoined Norman. "No, Mr. Smith told me last night you had nothing in the string that you had any hopes of. 'Tis so, sometimes, the stable gets clean out of form, and hasn't a horse in-training good enough to win a saddle and bridle. Next year luck changes, and you sweep the board. What work are you going to give 'em this morning?"

"Well, they'll do a little slow cantering, and then old Knight of the Whistle will lead the three-year-olds a smart mile spin. It's time to get on with them, you see, Mr. Slade; if they're ever to addle their keep, they ought to begin at the Newmarket Spring Meeting."

"Just so," said Norman. "You use the old gallop, I suppose? I shall go and stand about half up the rise of the finish, and then I shall see them well extended."

"Can't do better, sir," replied Parrott; and, turning his pony short round, he cantered back to his charges.

Slade made his way to the coign of vantage he had mentioned, unshipped his glasses, and gazed lazily at the horses, as on the other side of the down they went through some slow exercise. Presently he saw four of them walk quietly down to the mile-post, and knew that he was about to see the cream of Bill Smith's lot gallop. There was no keener race-goer than Norman Slade. No man more thoroughly loved racing for sheer sport; he could be as deeply interested in the issue of a trial on those Yorkshire wolds as on the result of the Derby; but still it was with languid curiosity he awaited the forthcoming gallop. There could be little interest in seeing a few notoriously bad horses scurry over their mile in an exercise gallop. Suddenly his attention was aroused; before the quartette had gone a quarter of a mile he could see that the second, a slashing big brown colt, had got his head up, and was fighting with his rider. Another few seconds, and, dropping his head, he makes an angry snatch at the bridle, bolts out of the Indian file in which they are galloping, tears past old Knight of the Whistle, and comes thundering along the gallop by himself.

"Got clean away with the lad," muttered Norman, as he watched the boy throw himself right back in his saddle, and strive in vain to check his horse; "but what on earth does old Bill mean by saying his three-year-olds are no good? If that's not a galloper I never saw one. What a stride he has! and how well he brings his quarters under him; now he is really going."

In vain the boy pulled: the big brown colt had completely overpowered him, and was bent upon doing a gallop entirely on his own account that morning. Norman watched him keenly as he swept past him, breasting the slight ascent like a lion, and going a good quarter of a mile past the termination of the gallop before his rider succeeded in pulling him up; he did so at last, and turned his mount a little ruefully to walk back. "It's well," he muttered, "that Parrott is in charge this morning instead of old Bill himself." Although it is at times impossible to prevent it, yet trainers look with considerable disfavor at a boy who lets his horse get away with him; and with a violent-tempered, course-tongued man like Bill Smith such mistake was met with a volley of abuse. By this time Tom Parrott had joined Slade, and, walking his pony alongside of him, they both proceeded to meet the culprit.

"Well, you young duffer," exclaimed Parrott, "what possessed you to let him get his head up like that? You might have known that he would twitch the bit out of your hands directly he dropped it again. Now don't say you couldn't help it. In the first place, you should have helped it; and in the second place, if I thought you could have helped it, you'd get your walking ticket this afternoon;" with which rather contradictory rebuke Mr. Parrott closed his lecture.

"Stop a moment, boy," said Slade authoritatively; "I want just to look your horse over;" and Norman's practised eye at once took keen stock of the colt's understandings.

"Can't see much of him here, Tom; but I'll have a good look at him in the stable, where you can strip him for me; his legs look sound enough."

"Oh, he's sound as a bell," rejoined Parrott; "if he was only as good as he is sound he'd do."

"What do you call him, and how is he bred?"

"Belisarius, by *Triumph*, out of *Darkness*," rejoined Parrott laconically.

"As stout blood as any in England," remarked Norman; "and what's more, Tom, as fine a mover as I've seen gallop for some time. Mr. Smith told me last night that he had tried all his three-year-olds good for nothing. Do you mean to tell me that brown colt was in the trial?"

"Yes, sir," replied Parrott, "and well beaten off."

"Well, Tom," said Slade, "did you see the colt go this morning? Can you shut your eyes to that? Who rode him in the trial?"

"One of the boys," replied Parrott. "I forget at this moment which, but I can easily ascertain."

"Do, Tom, as soon as we get back. I'll lay pounds to crowns the trial's all wrong. I'll come round and have a look at Belisarius in his box after breakfast."

And with that Slade strode away down the hill to satisfy the keen appetite that a morning on the wolds is wont to induce. "It's all nonsense," he said to himself, as he stepped smartly out in the direction of the farmhouse. "That trial was all wrong, I'll lay guineas to gooseberries; old Bill was most likely too ill to superintend it himself, and, at all events, no doubt never rode in it. Tom Parrott's a good head boy, but putting horses together is a little beyond him. If Bill had ridden in it he would have known what every horse in it was doing. As it is, I fancy Belisarius is a great big lazy colt that takes a great deal of getting out. I don't suppose any of them ever saw him gallop till this morning. Well, come, I'm going to have a more amusing week than I reckoned on. I've at all events found out something to do. I've got to discover the rights of that trial, to induce Bill to try them again, and also to ascertain whether that big brown colt is entered for any stakes worth winning."