

SADDLE AND SABRE.

(Continued).

"Pray don't mention it," rejoined Bertie, "it's one of the canons of the service that we must stick to each other; we did the best we could for Charlie, but you know there was nothing for it but India."

"I know," replied Lettie, "but I am afraid he finds the life out there very dull."

"Not a bit of it, Miss Devereux," rejoined Slade. "Charlie is engaged in quite a lively pursuit out there; he and half the soldiers in the Madras Presidency apparently are engaged in hunting down the craftiest and most murderous old robber that ever took to the roads. This Shere Ali keeps them tramping continually up and down the Presidency, and seems as difficult to lay hands upon as a Will o'-the-Wisp. We shall perhaps get there in time to get a turn at him too."

"You, Mr. Slade! Why what do you mean?"

"Ah! I forgot I hadn't told you we've got our orders for India; and, as luck has it, are going to the same Presidency that Charlie is in. We are off in about three or four weeks."

Then the conversation rather languished. These were two young people, very desirous of saying something to each other, and neither of them knowing exactly how to begin. Of course, it was all remarkably simple. Bertie Slade wished to impress upon Miss Devereux that she really ought not to marry Furzedon; while the lady on her side was equally anxious to impress upon him that she had not the slightest intention of doing so. It is all very well to smile as a bystander, and say, "Absurd! These people could not fail to come to an explanation at once." But have you no experience of these comparatively easy explanations *not* come to? Have you never thought, as you gained the street, of the thing you wished you had said in the drawing-room? And do not all of us know that the explanation so easy at first becomes more difficult day by day? Now, Lettie Devereux had good grounds for thinking that Bertie Slade was rather smitten with herself, and this seemed to make it rather difficult for her to volunteer the information that she was not engaged to Mr. Furzedon. If Bertie would only afford her the slightest opening it would be so easy; but then, Bertie, on his side, felt that he could not congratulate her. And that was the only way he could see of alluding to what he supposed to be a settled thing.

"You will probably see Charlie, then?" said Miss Devereux, at length, with that usual disregard of the size of the country apt to characterise people who have never been there.

"Probably," replied Bertie, "though it may be some time first; and I have come to say 'good-bye,' Miss Devereux; and I have one favor to ask you before I go. I wrote a note a short time ago to Mrs. Connop. I don't know whether she showed it to you, but at all events, I hope she will."

"I have seen it," interrupted Lettie. "Still, what have I to do with it?"

"I only want you to believe that I am quite certain of what I say in it, and that I am not merely detailing idle gossip."

"As I said before, I really don't see anything in it that concerns me."

Gilbert Slade was troubled. It was evident that he could depend upon no help from Miss Devereux. It was possible that she might indignantly refuse to listen to any impetation on her lover. But Bertie was resolute to speak out.

"I should have thought," he remarked, "that you could not be indifferent to hearing that any one you had lived upon friendly terms with ran the risk of being brought to shame. I have no wish to discuss it; but I thought that, as he had stayed at North Leach, and was intimate with you all, you ought to know it."

"Why ought I to know it?" exclaimed Miss Devereux indignantly. "Why will you keep insisting that this specially concerns me? If Mr. Furzedon has done anything disgraceful, surely my father or my brothers are the people you ought to communicate with."

It is very rarely that loss of temper conduces to promote a good understanding between people who are at cross purposes. But Miss Devereux's natural exasperation somewhat cleared the air, and dispersed the fog in which they were both rapidly losing themselves.

Bertie, like herself, was now not a little nettled, and it was somewhat sharply that he retorted, "I can only say that, according to rumor, anything affecting Mr. Furzedon is likely to be more severely felt by Miss Devereux than by any of her family. I suppose I was wrong to touch upon the subject, but Charlie and I were staunch friends."

"I know that," rejoined Lettie, gently; "and you are only saying to me what you would have said to him, had he been in England. But you're under a misapprehension, Mr. Slade. You have heard an absurd and rather annoying rumour that got about last season, and for which, believe me, there has never been the slightest foundation."

"Do you mean to say," said Bertie eagerly, "that there is no engagement between you and Furzedon?"

"Certainly not. I hardly understand myself how the rumor got about."

"As far as I am concerned, I had it from your brother."

"What—from Charlie? When?"

"Last spring, and that is why I have regarded it as a fact. When a young lady's brother tells you the thing is so, you must admit you have it from good authority."

"Yes, indeed," replied Miss Devereux; "but who on earth could have put that into Charlie's head? I am perfectly sure it never occurred to himself."

But here their conversation was interrupted by the entrance of Mrs. Connop, who was unfemininely glad to see her old favorite again, and gave Gilbert Slade a most cordial welcome.

"How long are you up in town for?" she asked, as she settled herself in her chair.

"Mr. Slade has come to say good-bye, auntie," interposed Miss Devereux.

"Good-bye, child! Why he has hardly said how d'ye do? And I haven't seen him for months. I've got lots to say to you, Mr. Slade. I am dying for a long gossip with you. What day will it suit you to come out and dine with us?"

"I am very sorry, but I hardly think that is possible. I have only to-night and to-morrow night in town, and shall be so busy all day that dinner will have to be a very movable feast with me. There is, of course, a great deal to do, and we really are off at once, and at very short notice."

Then the conversation became general, and Mrs. Connop was deeply interested in the fact that the —th Hussars were going to the same Presidency that Charlie was in, and that there was a possibility of the young scapegrace coming across his old comrades once more. Then Mrs. Connop, ever sanguine, began to speculate on the chances of Charlie getting back to his old corps, which she thought might be effected soon after the —th Hussars got out there, and Gilbert Slade had to explain to her that it was not so simple. War Office people wouldn't stand quite such a rapid shuffling of the cards as that. Then Charlie's affairs were discussed, and Mrs. Connop was very anxious to know if any progress had been made in their settlement, as was loud in her expressions of gratitude to Major Braddock for all he had done for him.

"It really is very good of him to trouble himself about Charlie's business at all," remarked the good lady; "in fact he don't deserve help or pity from any one."

"Uncle Bob is a real good sort," interposed Slade. "He took a fancy to your brother, you see, Miss Devereux, at first start, and although I am he was awfully disgusted at his having to leave the regiment, yet he is always staunch and true to those he has once befriended. I don't know what he has done about Charlie's business, but I shall see him to-night, and will come down to-morrow, and let you know all about it. And now I must be going."

"Why, I've seen nothing of you," cried Mrs. Connop; "I've not had time to ask you about this business of Mr. Furzedon."

"I don't think there is any necessity for me to say more than I have done," replied Slade, with a meaning glance at Lettie; "the papers will tell you all about it before a few weeks are over. Good-bye, Mrs. Connop. Good-bye, Miss Devereux," and as he bent over her hand he said in a low tone, "You can't think how happy you have made me," and then, with a hearty invitation from Mrs. Connop to come to luncheon to-morrow, Gilbert Slade took his departure. Not half a score of words, and yet Lettie Devereux seemed quite as content as if she had received a more explicit declaration.

CHAPTER XLI.

CHARLIE'S BAPTISM OF FIRE.

Charlie Devereux was once more upon the war-path, and he and his comrades, like baffled hounds, grew thoroughly savage in the pursuit of that perplexing marauder, Shere Ali. That the famous dacoit chief could assemble some hundreds at his back should he so will was now well known to the authorities, but that his influence through the Deccan is a thing that can be no longer borne with is a fact thoroughly recognized. It is true that he rarely gathers together his followers in such numbers as he can command, but that he can put himself at the head of a most formidable band at three or four days' notice is now perfectly understood. His tactics are those of the old Highland caterans in our own country, who sallied forth upon their reiving expeditions, sped homeward with their plunder, and then rapidly dispersed.

Shere Ali makes similar outbursts in unexpected localities, and then, in like manner, disappears with his booty, and is apparently swallowed up in the adjacent jungles. The marauder, too, has acquired a strange notoriety through all that country. Information given detrimental to himself and his followers has several times been punished with swift and singular barbarity. The villagers are shy of any allusion to his whereabouts or proceedings, and his brigandage has attained such an extensive scale as to augur pitiful weakness on the part of any Government that fails speedily to repress it. Even the veteran Hobson shook his head over it, and said in the course of his varied experience that Shere Ali was the most aggravating customer he had to deal with.

"We have come across him once," Charlie, he said, as they jogged along one morning at the head of their now mounted men, "or else, upon my word, I should begin to think this was quite a legendary chieftain; but he and his rapparees did shoot at us once; and we were very close upon their track a few hours afterwards."

"Yes," rejoined Charlie Devereux, "and the massacre of poor young Blades and his escort was a startling proof of Shere Ali being very much alive and on the move; but the dream will come true, Hobson, I know it will; we shall come up with him at last; and then, if I know anything of the temper of our fellows, they will be rather hard to hold. They have hunted him for many weary miles, and heard so many tales of the atrocities of himself and his followers, that I don't think there will be much quailing given when the day of reckoning does come."

"No; nor asked," said Hobson. "You will see these fellows with grimly as a fox in a trap, and with a like snarl upon their lips. But, what the d'uce is up? this looks like business of some sort." And, as he spoke, he bent pointed to one of the advanced guard, who was riding to them as fast as his horse could carry him.

"Now, Wilson, what is it?"