


TOUTING A STEEPLECHASE-RIDER.

CHAPTER I.

“ND what are you goin' to ride, Mister Bridoon, in the Grand Aintree?”

“The winner!” was the quick reply, as the person addressed, after depositing his hat on the rack of the smoking compartment of a first-class carriage on the Great Northern, pulled on a travelling-cap and produced a cigar-case which he held out to the speaker, a well-known bookmaker, then helped himself.

“Eh, the winner, eh? Coom, now, that's pootin' it strong. Back Stitch is faavoreet, and Mister Coonikam rides *that*, and Captain Muddleville he rides Vainglory, they tells me, and they're at twenty to one below that.”

“I don't ride either of these, Bessemer,” said the other. “You're quite right there, but I'll take a thousand to thirty I ride the winner all the same.”

“It's a bet,” said the other, producing his book and marking it down.

“Twice, if you like,” said the smoker, smiling.

“Twice!” was the answer, and the pencil rolled across the face of the betting-book again.

“And now, Mr. Bridoon, you must give it a name,” said the other. “I must have a name.”

“I'll give you nothing of the kind,” said the other, very sharply. “I said I would take the odds you promised 'gainst my riding the winner; if I don't finish first and pass the scales free of objection, I pay you; if I finish first and it's all right, you pay me. You'll get the name of the horse from the card when you see me on the back of it.”

“Well, you're a hard 'un and a hot 'un, Mr. Bridoon, but you'll tell me this, eh? Is it one as has been backed?”

“Well, that's asking a little too much; but I'll say this Bessemer, if it has, it has not been to any amount.”

"All right, I see—something you've got in the country. Well, bets are bets, mind, especially after they're booked, and I wouldn't mind losing my two thousand, but I think, when the horse is going to be backed, you might give me the nod."

"Not a nod or a wink," was the reply, as he jerked his cigar, which had not been drawing well, out of the window, and started a fresh one. You fellows find out too much, and a devilish sight too soon, and you can set your wits a-wool-gathering for this one. The owner's a deuced good sort, and won't back his horse for much, but that's no reason why I should spoil his friends' chances for having the best of a good thing. No, no, Bessemer, find out for yourself. Get Judex or Lockett, or some of these knowing chaps, to let you know, seeing they are so well informed, but don't ask me. I'm a dumb jockey in this case, and don't want to get back my voice. Find out, I say, if you can. Here's my station."

"Thank you for your tip, Mr. Bridoon, all the same, I'll find it out; maybe I won't, maybe I will."

"Ha, ha! do!" was the reply, "do, Bessemer! ha, ha! good-bye," and one of the best cross-country riders in the country crossed the platform, jumped lightly into a Whitechapel which was waiting, took the reins from the nattily-dressed little groom and drove off smartly as the train started.

"He's a smart boy, and no mistake!" soliloquised the book-maker, "and has good hands too—ay has he!—and a good head on a horse, but not off it. Backs himself to ride the winner, and thinks he's smart in not lettin' me know what it is. Deuced clever he'll call it! Oh yes, I know! He'll chuckle too, and tell some of the division and their dark 'un how I made the bets just to get the name, and how he did me. Well, well! poor things! I've seen 'em go to the wall for years—always through thinking they were clever; whilst infernal idiots, who knew they were fools, let things alone and came out of it. Something in the country they've got, and no mistake. That's all I want to know. Trust me, but I'll soon find out all!" and, throwing his cigar out of the window, he wrapped his big head in a newspaper and went off to dream of unbacked winners, double events, and the many things which Heaven is supposed to send book-makers in answer to their prayers for their daily bread.

The Hon. Benjamin Bridoon, of the 18th Corkscrew Guards,

had been a clever horseman from his boyhood. He had literally left the cradle for the saddle, and at nine years of age was noted as a clever man across country with his father's hounds, his steed, a sheltie of twelve hands, being better at going through than over. His bridle-hands, like those of all good horsemen, had been made early; he had formed a seat which was natural and sure, and he had developed a love which amounted to a passion for the sport. College-days over, he gave up the cricket-field for the racing-jacket; and, at the time of our incident in the railway train, was looked upon as "the coming man." His services indeed were always in demand, and were readily given without one single consideration for his neck, for "Benzie," as he was styled by his old companions at Eton, was of opinion that a man should, in order to be a good horseman and clever at "mistakes," have a lot of bad falls—a Napoleonic style of reasoning which served but to show his enthusiasm for the sport.

A week passed, and still old Bessemer did not notice the "coming," as the turf-writers call it, of any particular horse in the market. The dark ones he had, however, been able to narrow down to a very small lot, but where they were trained, and what they were equal to, he was ignorant of. He had seen young Bridoon twice or three times since, but elicited nothing more than the chaffing interrogation: "Well, Bessemer, you'd like to know what I'm to have my leg over at Aintree, eh? Well, you just find out ere it is too late."

"Maybe I will, lad," was the quiet reply, "but I dunno care nowt neither, for t'owd Bellwether is certain to canter in."

Gradually the intervening days slipped past, but no sign was made. The old bookmaker began to think he had won his sixty, and that Mister Bridoon's good thing had fallen through. At least, he said, when looking at his letters in the morning, "It's dang'd queer I hain't 'ad one single word from Dick Lyfast, though I gave 'im three pownies to do nowt else than find out all about it. Dang me if I thought he'd gone and blew it or boozed it, I'd hang 'im, that I would; but he ain't failed me yet, so I'll give him time"

CHAPTER II.

IT was blowing hard, and raining, if anything, harder, when a slenderly-made, though active and tough-made, young fellow arrived with the night train from the South at a little roadside station in the North. Visitors to that part, more especially by night trains, were few at that season of the year; and the stationmaster seemed a little surprised at the occurrence. Still more so was he when another—a stout, round-faced, jolly-looking man, clad in a long ulster coat—jumped out of the next compartment.

“Is this Doggerston station?” said the slender man.

“Yes, sir, Doggerston station.”

“Then I get out here for Slingvale?”

“Yes, sir, but it’s five good miles off, sir.”

“But is there not a trap waiting for me? There was to have been a trap sent for me from the Mulligan Arms.”

“Perhaps that’s it now, sir,” said the stationmaster, “just coming over the bridge there,” and sure enough the trap it was; with side-lamps glimmering through the darkness. As young Bridoon, for such it was, seized hold of his portmanteau, which he had carried with him, stowed under the carriage-seat, the stout man asked him if it would be too much of a favour to give him a ride over to the Mulligan Arms at Slingvale, seeing the night was just a bit darkish for tramping.”

“If there’s room, you are most decidedly welcome,” was the good-natured reply; and, fortified by this answer, the burly old gentleman lost no time in overcoming any scruples which the driver might have had by slipping him a shilling.

“And what brings you into these lonely parts at this season of the year?” asked the crack young cross-country rider, when they had got clear of the railway-avenue and were rattling merrily down the main road.

“Guanner, sir, *Guanner*, and bonedust, sir, and them fertilizin’ manures for spring crops, which farmers are needin’,

sir. You, maybe, could be doin' with a ton or two yourself, sir, if ye're in farmin' line. First-class stuff it is, sir, for turnips or 'taters, sir, and no better house than ours in the trade. Just have my card, sir."

Producing his pocketbook, he took from it a business-card, which, by the light of the lamp at the side, Mr. Bridoon made out to run as follows :—

GRASSUM AND CLOVERBUDS,
MANURE AGENTS AND MANUFACTURERS,
15, CHURCH STREET, BRISTOL.

Peruvian guanos, bonedust, dissolved bones and phosphates, and fertilizers of all kinds always on hand.

Presented by Mr. Rawlad.

"Well, guano is scarcely in my line, Mr. Rawlad," said the young fellow, laughing, "or I might buy from you, and I'm afraid that all in our business dissolve their own bones."

"Just so, ay, maybe, that a'll no say ; but what line be you on the road ? If ye was sellin' oilcake, or feedin' stuffs, we might go halves with the gig maybe, and do a good trade together like."

"Ah, well," said the young one, "we might, maybe, but I'm only down here on a short journey to see an old friend, and will be going back to-morrow night, thanking you all the same."

Wheeling sharp to the right, on rounding a large pine-wood, they had before them the little town of Slingvale, situated about three miles from the harbour of Strontian, from which runs daily to and from Belfast a first-class service of steamers. In a few minutes they were at the door of the Mulligan Arms, where Bridoon was saluted, in a most unmistakable Irish brogue, by a party who had been anxiously waiting his arrival. Another rushed out from the bar-parlour to shake his hand, and the welcome seemed to be as warm as what one gets at Baldoyle or the Curragh.

"And is this a friend wid yez?" said the first speaker, a sharp-faced, keen-eyed old Irishman.

"Oh no, some traveller in the manure trade I gave a lift to from the station, wants hard to sell me a ton of guano."

The reply seemed reassuring, for all passed inside, where a drop of the "cratur" was soon poured out for all, including the big, burly, good-natured Mr. Rawlad. Some nicely-cooked loin-

chops and ham and eggs having been disposed of quickly by the new arrivals, an adjournment was again made to the little back-parlour, where, over the steaming whiskey-punch the guano-seller told wonderful stories and jokes, and sung songs as the youngest of the Irishmen said, as if he had swallowed a live blackbird. Yet in the pauses Mr. Bridoon and the Irishmen would be seen to whisper together. "The ould horse," said the elder, has got over the effects of the voyage completely, and the young one is as fresh and as fit as a fiddle. The course is in capital order, and I've seen the ditch filled with water myself. We'll try them at even weights, and Barney here'll make the running for Snipe Dhust. Though he was singing away to himself, apparently quite unconcerned, Mr. Rawlad had his right ear distended till the drum was almost cracking, and as the word Snipe Dhust was mentioned, his eyes gave a merry twinkle. The whispering business over, there was more story-telling and singing, and the old Irishman remarked, as he retired for the night, that a "bigger warm-hearted, queer ould cove he hadn't met for many a day." "Half-past six in the morning sharp, and breakfast at six, mind!" was the last call from the stairhead to the landlord, and then the Mulligan Arms, with lights out, was as silent as the hamlets of the secluded little village.

CHAPTER III.

NEXT morning, all, including the good-natured and queer guano-seller, breakfasted at the hour appointed, and divided at the door—the Irishman and Bridoon to mind their own business whatever it was, and the former to solicit orders for his manures. The latter drove off in a westerly direction in a waggonette, while Mr. Rawlad was superintending the getting-out of a dogcart. They lifted hats and so bade good-bye. Three miles up the road the waggonette party got down, and found at the edge of a wood a couple of horses ready waiting for them, and close to the hedge a set of ordinary farmyard-scales.

"Good morning, Masterton," said Bridoon, as he looked over what was apparently the youngest of the horses very carefully. "You certainly have got him in rare condition."

"Yes, sir, if he isn't fit to run he never will be," said the private trainer—for such he was—to the confederacy of which Bridoon was chief.

The young Irishman named Barney threw off quickly his large frieze ulster which covered him down to the heels, and revealed himself in boots, breeches, and spurs; and Mr. Bridoon, on casting off his overcoat, quite as ample, showed himself to be similarly attired. Both men seized the saddles which were held out to them, both brought down the beam in an easy, light manner, but no more. The weights were, as arranged, equal for both, though, as the Irish jockey remarked, "I should be able to give you a stone, though I hope you'll show it to be the other way about." In a few minutes both horses were mounted, and at the word "Go!" the old horse was sent in advance of the other at a brisk pace along a stretch of grass. A stiff hedge they skimmed over lightly, sank a ploughed hill-side, leaped a stone wall, and disappeared for a few minutes out of view to reappear afar off with the old horse still making running.

"Barney's sending him on," said the Irishman, "but your horse is going all within himself, Mister Masterton," for Mr. Bridoon, through the glass, could be seen holding the young one back. The pace was increased as they came along the slope of the hill in front of the onlookers, both horses taking their fences in beautiful style; then they bent to the right, flew the wet ditch, and, at a regular bursting pace, started for home—the winning-post being the starting-post.

"Begorra! Barney's making the ould one fly!" said the Irishman excitedly, "but, bedad! he's not able to shake off the young one!"

"It's a thousand to one on Snipe Dust!" shouted Masterton a moment afterwards, as, half-a-mile from home, young Bridoon gave his horse its head and let it draw level. A hundred yards from home, the old horse was done with, and the young horse cantered in an easy winner of his trial, just as a man drove round the corner of the wood in a gig, waving his whip and shouting: "Well done, mister! I'm danged if I seen sich a horserace sin



Well done mister!

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Pullamby market! Eh, mon, but that nag's a gey guid 'un! I'd give five tons o' Peruvian guanner for that anc, I'se would, I warrant you."

The old Irish trainer laughed, though Masterton looked a little suspicious.

"Don't mind him," said the former, "he's a raw green traveller in the manure trade, a-beggin' for orders."

"It's just as I thought," said Mr. Bridoon, riding up, "my horse can give Cruiskeen a stone and an easy beating, and that's quite good enough to win anything."

"Bedad! and it is, and it's meself wouldn't ha' believed it; but you done it, and at a good pace too."

"All that we've got to do is to get the money right, Masterton," said the young fellow, nodding acquiescence.

"Yes, sir," said the other.

"Where's the nearest telegraph-office—I understand there's not one at Slingvale?"

"There's not, sir; but there's one at Doggarvale, five miles from this."

"Well, then, give me my top-coat."

Having got hold of his top-coat, and taken from the inside pocket a telegram-form, he asked the old Irishman to hold his hat for his desk, and wrote out the message:—

From	B. BRIDOOON, Slingvale.		To	R. WILSON, Victoria Club, London.
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The puppy has got well over the distemper, and is safe to win. So on with commission at once.

"There," he said, "Wilson knows what I mean by that, as I arranged with him before coming away. Now who is to deliver this?"

"Are you driving Doggarvale way?" he asked of Mr. Rawlad.

"I am; is there anything I can do for you?"

"Yes, as you pass the post-office you might hand in this message, which is about a dog I bought from a friend here, and be sure about it first thing when you get in."

"It's the first thing I'll do," was the reply, as he folded it up, stuck it in his waistcoat-pocket, and gave the little mare he was driving her head.

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Next morning, when Mr. Benjamin Bridoon got hold of a London daily paper, he turned rapidly to the sporting column, and there found, as he expected, that a commission had evidently been thrown into the market to back Snipe Dust, which had come with a rattle in the betting. "Ah," he said, "Mr. Rawlad sent off my message in good time from Doggarvale, and all we have got to do is to win. At twelve noon he found his way to the Victoria Club, in Wellington-street, where he asked for Wilson. Judge of his surprise when the first exclamation which fell from the latter was: "Why the devil didn't you let me have your telegram sooner? Bessemer had backed the horse for every shilling he could get before it came in."

"What time did you receive it?"

"Twelve o'clock."

"But you did receive it?"

"Of course I did—here it is."

"D——n these country telegraph-girls with their carelessness! But how or where could Bessemer have got his information?"

"Your Irish friends must have done you."

"That I'll swear they didn't; they were never out of my sight till two o'clock on the afternoon of the trial."

Notwithstanding the rumours which were prevalent as to the non-running of Snipe Dust for the Grand Aintree, Snipe Dust did run, and won, as the newspapers put it, in the commonest of canters, Mr. Bridoon having but to sit still and hold him. But the division behind the horse were not somehow satisfied. They had been forestalled in the market, and were inclined to blame one another for having played false. They were all together at the outside of the paddock, taking their seats in their hired conveyance for home when they heard a well-known voice shout: "Hey, Capting! good luck to you!"

"Hilloa, Mr. Rawlad!—that's Mr. Rawlad," said young Bridoon.

"Mr. Rawlad!—Mr. Lyfast, you mean!—the cleverest scoundrel on the turf, the man that does old Bessemer's horse-watching and dirty work!"

The Irish trainer exchanged looks with the winner of the great race, and the hearts of both sank far down into their waistcoats. Could it really be? Yes, there was no mistake, for as he drove off

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he shouted : " Hey, mind the guanner! First-class guanner for green crops, like you, eh? Good-day, old man, glad to see the *Poop has got over the distemper.*"

Young Benjamin Bridoon said nothing, but he will be a very clever man who will ever again try on him the experiment of touting a steeplechase-rider.